

*The Salem Witch who loved God:  
Mary Esty*

by Ann Ransdell

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The horror began with a dead cat. Mary found the frozen creature on her doorstep one January day. She knew it was Tituba's cat<sup>1</sup> from the parsonage down the road. Quickly she carried the corpse to the far side of the house, because her friends would soon be arriving. Then she caught her breath as she looked out at the winter landscape. The birch trees stretched like martyrs pierced by barbs of twig shoots.

The women followed Mary into the kitchen where she served them ashcakes prepared from ground and sun dried, flour of birchbark. They gathered for a quilting at the house on Salem Street in Topsfield. Mary's husband, Isaac Esty, encouraged her to have them over, as he liked hearing them laugh together.

"There's not enough laughter nowadays," he'd said with his arms around her the previous winter night, when she told him of the meeting. She murmured that she missed her dead children, her grief still sore these many years. In her memory she often heard again infant crowing and she inhaled the baby scent of tiny fingers. In wordless reply Isaac had massaged her back to comfort her. She had fallen asleep holding his hand.

Now, the women helped her clear away the dishes. Through the kitchen windows rimmed with frost they could see the dying daylight. She told them the herb dyed cloth fragments reminded her of last autumn's leaves, on the cleared land between her house and the road. This road had two names. Salem villagers called it the Topsfield Road, while to the Topsfield residents it was the Salem Road.

"Does Tituba know that her cat is missing?" Mary asked them. "I found its frozen body on my doorstep this morning. It will pain her to know that it's gone."

"Serves her right, for begging herbs off each ship returning from Barbados," muttered Constance, as she straightened her new lace collar. "No black slave in her right mind would keep a black cat, for fear she'd be taken for a witch."

"Accused of witchcraft and then hanging for it would be worse than being strangled by a witch specter," said another, as she handed a whimpering baby to Hannah, Mary's daughter.

<sup>1</sup> Ann Petry, *Tituba of Salem Village* (Harper Trophy: 1964), 207.

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This book is an imaginative biography of a real person, Mary Towne Esty, and her family. There are fictional characters in the story, however, most references are to real people, places and events.

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"So much talk of witchcraft," Mary remarked to the women sitting down again at the quilt frame, as she folded away cloth scraps.

"Ipswich Village is full of such talk," the other persisted.

"We know these evils exist," Mary replied. "But maybe if our minds were centered on the goodness of God rather than the Enemy, we could see more of good, and help to birth it." She looked over at her daughter Hannah, who nodded. The two shared a warm relationship freed of the binding constraints that beset other Puritan outlooks.

"He who looks for sorrow will find it," Hannah quoted one of her mother's family maxims. Mary smiled at her.

"Pain and ugliness are fruits of Satan. Why should we focus on them?" Mary glanced at the baby girl. "Even this child is ugly when her face is screwed up with colic. That doesn't make her ugly, for when the pain passes, she is again a sweet angel."

"I love her even when her face is ugly with pain," murmured Mary's close friend, as she placed the baby on her broad breast. "The folks preoccupied with witchcraft seem to spot it everywhere. I worry they will start seeing it here in Topsfield."

Constance, the baby's mother, spoke ruefully. She knew well the Esry family, as she had lived with them awhile when she had come to the village as an Indian war refugee. "The fight over the land is heating up again, Mary, you know it is, and I wonder what your sister Rebecca thinks about it. Her husband is on the new committee of the Salem Village meetinghouse. You know their fight with Rev. Parris flared up when they voted not to raise his salary through a tax. Why, your own nephew Samuel doesn't even attend meetings now." Mary turned away. She would have to speak carefully to the pretty Constance, because the young woman's loyalties shifted like the winter winds. Mary had given her great help in the past, but Constance expressed no gratitude because she felt none.

"How can you keep doing kindly by sick folks and all, when their relatives in Salem Village are so mean spirited?" Constance spoke to Mary's retreating back. Mary turned to face her.

"Constance, you know I lost two little girls as infants. Sickness so often brings death alongside. We must shore each other up whenever the need arises, as we don't ever know if we'll be the next to suffer."

Mary sat down suddenly, as the vision passed before her mind's eye of her youngest sons, fourteen year old Joshua and nineteen year old Jacob. They'd both been ill during the autumn. She recalled her sister Rebecca's words about the sermon preached by Rev. Parris at the Salem meetinghouse. *He's wrong to center upon God's punishments for sin, through*

*sickness and death coming to sinners. The ministers should feature God's healing and creation, to encourage folks when misfortune comes. We don't need to be hearing so much about the Devil.* Mary had learned, as a child, not to voice criticism before the wrong people because back then, some forty years ago, it'd risk a lashing, or a hot iron bored through the tongue. Since the earliest Puritan settlements, each of these punishments had threatened Puritans who spoke aloud their dissatisfaction with sermons. Now in 1692, not so many public injuries actually occurred these days, but their memory burned.

"Mary, the land dispute will be the end of us," Constance continued. She did not have the patience for religion that Mary did, and she disliked talking about it all the time.

"It's not as if there's not enough land to go round, neither," added another, looking up over her stitching. "But the Putnams aren't satisfied with their share, and they'll move heaven and earth to get those access rights for their cattle, on top of all the timber they want."

"It's fearful to think of what greed does to people, and them not even knowing what they do is wrong. You know, they convince themselves they are right, and then they convince others," added Mary's friend.

"That's just what worries me," said Constance, closing her eyes to slits in the twilight gloom. Constance did not have faith that God would protect the virtuous and punish the wicked, as the Puritans had always heard, day after day, from the pulpits at Boston, Topsfield, Salem, and Dedham.

"Let's add some wood to the fire and warm up this place," Mary put in briskly. "We can't see well enough to stitch anymore."

The next morning, in their bedroom on the second floor, Mary turned over in the big bed. She awakened just enough to reach over and cover her husband Isaac's warm flesh from the icy draft. Against her nose the quilts smelt of pine fresh air. The drift of Isaac's warm flesh upon her breast carried her back to her youth. She slipped into a twilight dream of the first night they'd touched one another. The soft summer stars had blessed the Puritan couple with God's created candle light. She had seen Isaac's kind behavior to young animals, to children, and that attracted her. So different from her father, a good man too, but with a fierce temper. Her father had lived to be very elderly, and her mother Joanna indulged him to the end. They were a happy couple, a good example of matrimonial union, because Joanna followed one principle: avoid confrontation. The old man, more than twenty years his wife's elder, thought that his wife would always agree with him. What old William Towne didn't know, was that Joanna simply didn't tell him anything that might create trouble.

Moreover, she would seem to agree, but then she'd do just what she wanted in the first place, and keep it from him. She told her daughter Mary that it just wasn't worth it to get him riled up. It was only after his death that Joanna's strength became public, when she stood up to the Gould clan and defended the minister Gilbert from drunkenness<sup>2</sup>. Her daughter-in-law, Phoebe Gould Towne, was hard put to get along with old Joanna, who lived with her son and Phoebe. Joanna was not bad tempered, but Phoebe's own mother was on the opposite side against Reverend Gilbert. Justice must be upheld: this was a Towne family rule. Joanna believed Gilbert innocent. She emphasized his distemper as the source of his sermon's vagaries, and she was bound to say it. Joanna passed on this strength, as well as the kindness to soften it, to Mary.

Mary's dream passed into the last time they made love in the kitchen, the previous autumn, after Hannah and the boys had gone out. She'd been stirring some soup in the kettle on the hearth. Isaac took her hand and pulled him to her. As he cradled her head upon his arm and gazed down at her beneath him on the braided rug, she looked past him out the window through the trees. Her heart was filled with gratitude to God who'd given her a loving man. Now, in the winter dawn of the contemporary January, Mary slipped again into the dream of their autumn embrace. The creamy light of the golden fall afternoon reflected off the sparrow wings that dropped birds through the thinning leaves.

Decades past when they'd married, Mary knew Isaac was the man for her. He worked hard in his Topsfield barrel business. He could think for himself; he was not taken in by regulations presented as if they were God's laws. Mary had listened carefully to the gospels and she could read them for herself.

She knew the distinctions Disciple Paul had made between the rule of law and the rule of God. After all, as Paul taught, Christ had come to save men from the rule of law.

### *Samuel Parris at the Parsonage*

Down the road, at the parsonage in the frosty dawn, Samuel Parris ordered his slave, Tituba, to prepare a poultice for his wife, Elizabeth Eldridge. She was fighting another infection, and it needed to be brought to the surface. The smell of Elizabeth was so putrid that Parris

lighted a bayberry candle upstairs to spread its spicy fumes. Parris did not want to call in the doctor; he had no money because the conflict about his salary, as Minister to the Salem Village Meetinghouse, had not been resolved. The parsonage was icy cold upstairs where his wife lay. To warm her hands, he offered her the lambs-wool gloves he'd been given when he arrived in Salem. He tried to speak kindly to Elizabeth, but his own back was aching terribly. Something had happened to it when they had made the move from Boston to Salem Village three years ago. He had lifted a barrel full of onions and had thrown out a spinal disc. The pain had nearly driven him mad. Heat was the only answer for it, and Tituba could handle the coals, the compress, and the massage without burning him. Therefore, he was irritated that his wife's needs for Tituba's care would supersede his own. While he was awaiting Tituba, down in his study, which occupied part of the large meeting room across from the kitchen, he was planning his sermon. This time he would let them have it. The Porter contingent had opposed him from the outset. Now they were marshalling forces against him. He would remind them that he was the living representative in their midst, of the Word, and opposition to him was opposition to God's Holy Writ.

Samuel Parris' business interests in Barbados were not supplying enough silver to meet his family's needs. The lack of firewood to heat the parsonage was becoming a health issue. Now he tapped his foot impatiently, waiting for his servant slave, and wrote more Jeremiads for his flock. He looked down at his black boots. They were deteriorating quickly in the harsh New England winter snow. One of the buckles was broken, and due to his backache, he had to pull on his black woolen breeches at an angle over his calf on the left side. As a result, he had torn the breeches not on the seams but on the fabric itself. This embarrassed him so much that, whenever he stood in front of the congregation to preach, he tried to hide the left calf by holding it behind him or by standing with his right side angled out. These peculiar postures further strained his back and drove his irritation to the breaking point after three hours of sermonizing. Only when he let free rein to his anger, when he forgot his ripped breeches and jumped with his fist pointing upward to the heavens or downward to hell, could he get into the material and enjoy his power over the listeners. He felt quite justified in shouting at them because of the sacrifice his position had made upon his family and his own health. Parris was especially angry at Samuel Nurse, who refused to take communion and who seemed to Parris to lead the new committee. The group had recently been formed to discuss why they'd delayed in paying him.

<sup>2</sup> Persis W. McMillen, *Currents of Malice: Mary Towne Esty and Her Family in Salem Witchcraft* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Peter E. Randall Publisher, 1990), 68.



Parris thought about the feud between his allies, the Putnams, and the Proctors, the other powerful family in the village. He really didn't care about their land boundary issues except when it directly affected him. Last October, the Putnam dominated rate committee was ousted, and replaced by Joseph Porter, Joseph Hutchinson, Daniel Andrew, Samuel Nurse and Joseph Putnam who'd gone over to the other side with his wife. Parris was infuriated when, on January 3, three men had refused to take communion from his hands, protesting his arbitrary obstinacy.<sup>3</sup> What right did these men have to question the hand of God that he represented? By the time Tituba came downstairs to attend to his back, he was in a rage.

"Tituba, get thee behind me at once! See that the coals do not burn my back!"

Tituba hastened into the kitchen and stoked the huge fireplace. She tripped over her blue woolen petticoat that Mrs. Parris gave her last winter. As he watched her steady herself on the doorjamb so as not to fall, Parris thought about how she managed to land on her feet, like a cat, no matter what. It galled him to think that he was as much an outsider to Salem Village as she was. Parris recalled his first sermon, the one where he'd likened his role in the village to his position as father and head of his family. The villagers had covenanted to agree with him and to obey him. Now they had the audacity to break their agreement, and to put the welfare of the community at risk. He had sworn to protect the spiritual well being of the village and he was committed to God to carry out that oath. The powerful masculine bond he felt with his Creator could take on any threat. He despised the weaker sex and all those races that formed quick alliances with the demon. The red men and the blacks were both of a piece as far as he was concerned: they should be beaten into obedience, whereas the women could be broken spiritually as sisters of Eve. He detested their weakness. The rules constraining women were designed for their own protection; for, like children, they could not manage their own behavior. They needed the wisdom and reason of men to direct their inferior minds. As Tituba skillfully unwrapped his weskit and applied the cloths warmed by the coals to his back, he thought about his strange youngest daughter.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Charles Hoffer, *The Devil's Disciples: Makers of the Salem Witchcraft Trials* (Johns Hopkins: 1996), 50-53.

## Mary Wakes Up

In the Esy household, the gathering light that January morning was enough to arouse Mary. She came to consciousness in the warm bed beside Isaac, and continued her rumination. She loved Isaac because he didn't condemn people. Like Christ, he did not judge others for work they must do on the Sabbath to survive. Even as a child, she'd been drawn to Christ's compassion; he'd healed on the holy day and declared, "the Sabbath is made for man and not man for the Sabbath." Shortly after their courtship began, Isaac had shown Mary the secluded place where he kept special barrels for making elderberry wine, and then parsnip wine from the same barrels. Mary knew that although the Puritan women were not supposed to drink, she could sip the wine alone with Isaac in their own home. As a young couple, they'd known other Puritans who made their own liquors since orders for wine and cider barrels were always forthcoming. Sometime later, it would be said that the man appointed to provide the sacramental wine for communion in the meeting house, sold liquors and wines at retail for his own profit. However, soon the Topsfield villagers ordered their wine and cider barrels directly from Isaac. Cider sold for ten shillings a barrel, to the profit of the apple-growers. Isaac never asked questions nor made people feel he suspected them. Why should he mind, when he made wine himself?

Mary loved her practical man whose pleasures were centered on the natural and the pure. Most of all, Isaac and Mary shared an uncommon focus, in that community, upon God's love rather than his punishments. They expressed this love in their tender care for one another. Mary relaxed whenever Isaac rubbed her back, her arms, her feet and her legs. He made sore muscles from farm labor depart under his strong hands. Likewise, Mary spent happy moments thinking of ways to please her husband through cooking, saving time for him, and touching him tenderly. She took special care to prepare clam chowder, his favorite, as often as possible. The couple's affection spilled over onto their children. They taught them to glorify God through praise, through kindness to each other and to the villagers. Bad moods were not indulged. Father or mother would hear the child out, and then distract them with something on the farm. The birth of a lamb or a chick was given to the children as a miracle of creation, and the mother's care of the young likened to God's care for his people. The children took turns feeding the animals and cleaning their pens where they could watch the babies grow.

Mary knew their communication to be the couple's best habit. They came to agreement on most issues, and she didn't have to hide her independence like her mother, Joanna, had. Mary and Isaac had both been born in England and brought to the Puritan settlement aboard ship when both were children. Before their marriage, when they first touched one another, she knew he would be gentle. She had felt Isaac's fingers under her skirts and kissed him tenderly, to set the tone of their embrace, as well as to cover her hesitation. She removed her cap, unfurled her hair, undid her white collar and placed it beside her. To her surprise, he did not take her beyond touching. She knew then that he would court her, arouse and pursue her. Other Puritan couples made love for years before they married, and many were pregnant when they married. But Isaac and Mary took their time. So began slowly their long passion that produced ten children. Seven had survived.

Now after forty years, Isaac's barrels were the best, in fact, for miles around. He could make casks like the hogsheads that stored tobacco, as well as buckets, pails, butter churns and tubs for milk. Other coopers did one or the other, but he could also make watertight barrels for liquids such as molasses and beer. During the last decade, he'd trained apprentices to cut the staves and assemble them with hoops. His strong arms could still lift a heavy barrel. Because he was a skilled, hard worker who saved rather than spent, after a time they'd acquired a larger plot of land in Topsfield. Mary's older sister, Rebecca of Salem Village, was also married many years. Their younger sister Sarah was herself a remarried widow with grown children.

Villagers still turned to watch Mary walk gracefully through Topsfield where she carried her basket. Mary and Isaac worked hard for their prosperity. They had a good reputation for their integrity, and also because Puritans believed prosperity a reward for virtue. Mary and Isaac both knew, however, that bad fortune could shadow good people who didn't deserve it. They tried to help when storms destroyed a neighbor's barn or roof. Mary took food to others in need. Isaac, however, would try to curb her generosity. He was as careful with produce as with profit. Not a miser, he was cautious not to waste anything his family might use. Who knew if the neighbor would eat the food Mary prepared? Their few disagreements usually concerned material goods. She'd have planned to give more to their children than he thought best. He never refused them any food, but he made them work hard for other items, whereas she spent hours thinking up ways to secure those items for their little ones. More than once he'd told her that he admired the Indians, because they disdained worldly

goods. Indians, he said, knew better than to be lured into the white man's trap of greed. Here, too, she knew Isaac to be different from other Puritans who demonized the red men. Isaac saw past the atrocities they committed in their raids. He told his wife, privately, that the retribution for treaties broken by the settlers was, if not justified, certainly predictable, after the settlers sold captive Indian women into slavery after promising them freedom.

As the winter rain began to tatter down upon the roof shingles, Mary turned over in bed. Soon it would begin to snow. Her mind skated back to her father, who'd left England because he couldn't tolerate the encroaching power of the Stuart monarchy. The king had sent his own men into the English towns to replace the local militia officers and peasant juries with administrators who would obey the monarch's will. The long voyage to America, the risk of the Indian attacks and the hard labor did not deter William Towne, her proud father. Most Puritans wanted freedom of worship. They believed England had abandoned true piety; the Yuletide debaucheries were enough to disgust a Godly man. Mary was a devoted Christian, yet she knew there were pleasures allowed the holy God she worshipped. Even his Son had attended weddings and partaken of wine. Mary also had a beautiful singing voice and she loved to learn new songs as well as hymns. Often she could raise her own moods by singing as she worked. She had a talent for story telling that was known in the community. Years ago, when daughters Hannah and Sarah were little, she had a catechism school just for little girls. She taught by using parables and stories that the children enjoyed. Mary pulled the pillow beneath her head and prayed, *Dearest Lord Christ, I believe in you and seek to do your will*, as she greeted God and the new day.

### Horror in the Parsonage

The frozen winds of February beat against Parris' back as he limped home from the meeting house. No matter that his sermon had won him no friends. At least he had told the truth: that his enemies were servants of Satan. The lull on the frontiers was due, he thought, to the harsh winter weather and not to any superior strategies of the military men who were also the colony's magistrates. God must be punishing the Puritans for their backsliding. He had tried his hardest to warn them, but to no avail. When he preached that Christ himself was judging against them, the stiff necks of the Porters and their allies had snapped their chins

even higher. The devil was lurking about the settlement, waiting for the right opportunity to enter their homes. When he opened the door to the parsonage, he heard with dread the weird noises his daughter Betty made, as she thrashed about the parlor floor. She sounded like an animal, he thought, and not a domesticated one.

"Tituba! Get this girl under control!" he yelled. The black woman rushed out of the kitchen and put her arms around Betty. The girl squirmed and tossed in her embrace.

"Master, the mistress has ordered me to bring her some hot broth. It is so cold upstairs that the water in the wash bowls has frozen to ice. Her cough is worse, and I must take her something to warm her chest right away. Tituba looked with pleading eyes into the master's stern face.

"All right, I will take the maid," he said roughly, gathering Betty's thin arms into his hands and hoisting her into his lap. He covered her eyes with his large hand and held her shoulders tightly as Tituba released her. Tituba turned and ran out of the room, back into the kitchen. She could be seen through the hall doorway, rushing back and forth from the fire to the table. Soon she carried a tray, with a covered bowl of broth, out into the hallway and up the stairs. Parris prayed for all he was worth, that his child would recover. If she kept it up, he would be forced to call the other ministers to help him pray for her healing. But what on earth was driving her? He dared not think. Whatever it was, it seemed to be contagious. Ann Putnam too had begun to show signs of the disturbance for the first time in her eleven years. Betty's other friend in the colony, Mercy Lewis, servant to the Putnams, and also Elizabeth Hubbard, niece to the doctor, were similarly infected. Whatever it was, it was dangerous. Betty had already burned herself when she rolled into the fireplace.

Tituba may have had something to do with it, he thought, with her immersion in the Barbadoes culture. He despised it. While some liked the climate and landscape of flowers and trees, he preferred cool, calm and orderly England to either the islands or the New World, where he'd attended Harvard for three years before his father died. He did not finish the degree but returned to Barbados when his father had a stroke. He mused on Bridgetown, Barbados, which he was not sorry to leave after his fiancé, Deborah Seton, died of yellow fever. He placed his now quiet child in the rocking chair and summoned Tituba again to massage his back. As the black slave began her ministrations, he lay there thinking about his wife's illness. The first outbreak had come after the birth of Betty, in 1683, after they had returned to Boston. Something had gone

wrong in the labor, and the delivery damaged her uterus. Later, the third baby's birth had increased the problem, making Elizabeth a semi-invalid. It was about this time too that her odor had permeated their bedroom. It was a dreadful, infected smell of urine mixed with female matter. The stench so repelled him that he found himself driven out of the bedroom altogether. He slept on the couch in the parlor. Fortunately, Tituba roused easily, and she ascended the stairs from the kitchen whenever she heard her mistress call. Many nights she slept on a pallet at the foot of the marriage bed. Thank heaven he had Tituba to bathe Elizabeth and to empty her slops. It took a super human control not to vomit when the bedridden woman needed care.

Parris thought with envy of his older brother's steady life in England. The man was a non-conformist minister but did not have to fight for his salary. The older brother had received the bulk of the family fortune and had spent it on his house and his books. The fact that Parris, here in the colonies, was forced to browbeat the Puritans just to get firewood, seemed to him the ultimate injustice. The bitterness of his position rose up in his throat like bile and threatened to choke him. When Tituba began to hum an island tune, in keeping with the rhythmical hand massage moves upon his back, he snapped at her to cease. Then he began to doze and to dream of the past in Barbados, and the time he was bitten.

### Samuel Parris in Barbados as a young man

The baby scorpion that bit Parris' foot was too small to kill him; the poison would merely inflame his leg. "Damn," he exclaimed as he put down the post he was inserting into the freshly dug hole. "John Indian, come here to help me," he yelled to his slave. The black man came dashing through the fields and gasped when he saw his master's bloody foot.

"Take the damn thing off me," Parris ordered. But John Indian did not know the proper treatment for such bites.

"Let me get Tituba," he pleaded. "She's over there in the birthing hut, next to the beach. She was helping deliver a ..." Parris interrupted him. "Be quick then. I can feel the fire from the bite climbing my leg."

Parris did not lie down so as to slow the movement of the poison up his trunk. He leaned against a palm tree and watched the nimble black youth leaping across boulders that separated the field from the beach. The coral reefs were pink beneath the clear ocean waves; flamingos called from



the jungle behind him. Barbados was alluring only to those who loved the tropics; he was not among them.

He had come with his father, Thomas Parris, from England to Barbados, to manage a slave plantation. His father owned both land and slaves but did not profit from the slave market as expected. Samuel Parris disagreed with the harsh treatment given his father's slaves. Himself a strong Christian, he could not stomach the 100 stroke whippings that laid open the backs of black men and women and frequently killed them. Instead, he was drawn to the parlor room of another plantation family, the Setons, whose daughter Deborah won him with her gentle ways.

Deborah had a beautiful, classic blonde face, hazel eyes and long eyelashes. Her mouth was as generous as her laughter. She was fun-loving; she would hide from him and then spring out at him from behind the palm trees and shrubs. The island was a paradise for the young lovers, as the balmy moonlit nights backlit their trysts with silvered water and starlight. The Seton family welcomed him and began planning a wedding. Deborah was quite involved in the fashions of the day; her tastes were expensive but were matched by her fortune. She especially loved the island scents of sandalwood and mimosa. She taught young Tiruba how to distill perfume from the flowers and how to tell fortunes to pass the time during frequent storms, skills she'd learned from her own mammy. Deborah also taught her slave how to read and write. Deborah would write notes to Samuel and play scavenger hunt on the large verandah when the rainy wind ruled out boating or swimming. Samuel looked forward to a life with her.

Samuel had courted her for several years when suddenly she caught yellow fever. Before her death, he had promised Deborah to purchase her maid, Tiruba, a smart young woman, and to keep her in his care. Deborah had grown up with Tiruba after Tiruba's mother gave birth to her about the same time that Deborah herself was born. Samuel's last conversation with Deborah was attended by the slave girl, who was attentive to the comfort of her dying mistress. Tiruba mopped her face and opened the shutters to let in the cooling afternoon breeze off the Caribbean waves. Turquoise ocean waves lent their salty scents to the bedroom air. Samuel kissed Deborah's hand as she stroked his face.

"My dearest, take care of Tiruba; she'll be helpless without your protection. You see how she loves me; she has been my greatest comfort besides you, yourself. If you keep her beside you, you will always have me there too. She can tell you stories about the fun we had as children when we played as equals. You know that my mother loved her mother too."

There followed more instructions about her jewels and favorite possessions before she closed her eyes forever.

Samuel was devastated by Deborah's death. He was haunted by her face, her beautiful hazel eyes, and her melodious voice. Sometimes he heard her calling him to him in his dreams. He would wake up with his face pressed into the bedding and his arms knotted around the pillows. Months after he bought Tiruba, he learned that she favored John Indian, one of his father's male slaves. After he returned from Harvard upon the occasion of his father's death, he decided to buy John Indian as a way to honor Deborah's memory. The slaves had a ritual black marriage before the ship sailed north again to the New England Puritan colony.

When he began to murmur Deborah's name, as Tiruba massaged his back in the cold parlor that February morning, Tiruba knew better than to rouse him from a pleasant dream. She wished that she too could return to those pleasant days in her homeland.

## Mary Remembers Goody Glover and Mary Dyer

It had been several weeks since the women had arrived to quilt at the Esty house. Mary rose early one morning and went carefully down the wooden stairs from the bedrooms on the second floor to the large kitchen. She bent over to stoke the fireplace embers. She worked quietly, minimizing the hiss of the coals against the iron, in a habit acquired when they lived in their first house. That had been a one room cottage, where her babies had slept at one end. Before they'd moved to this two story saltbox with a jettison, an overhang that served for protection against possible Indian attacks, her children would have been asleep in the far corner of the big, one story room. The exposed ceiling beams had cast shadows in the firelight. Their one room house had been large enough for them all, because the young couple were separated from the children by a distance of wooden plank floor and by bed curtains. The spinning wheel, butter churn and a narrow ledge holding cooking utensils and pots, had marked off the kitchen area.

Now, as she straightened up, she recalled the fireplace in the old house. It formed one continuous wall of brick masonry that ran the length of the house. Sometimes she missed the simplicity of the cottage. Now that her children were grown, and she had a two story home to clean, the housework took more time. Hannah, Joshua and Jacob were still asleep upstairs. They had been lulled back to dreaming by the sound of the

leaves blown about in the frosty wind. Soon Hannah would wake up and come down to help her mother get breakfast.

Mary moved the crane on the iron cooking pot out of the way as she added three more logs to the embers. When the logs had caught fire she drew her rocking chair closer, and sat with the Bible in her hands. She turned the whale oil lamp towards her chair so that she could read. She knew the scriptures well. She thanked God for her home and provisions. God's shelter, she knew, was more important than the house, because it was a fortress against the wile of Satan, the enemy who roamed constantly seeking prey. She wondered what it was like in the Holy Land, where Christ was born. Instead of New England bears, wolves and rattlers, over there the Israelites would have to avoid flying snakes.

After she heard the boys stirring overhead, and Hannah's footsteps on the stairs, Mary began to prepare an onion and potato soup. The tears produced by the chopped onion forced her to reach for a cloth to dry her eyes. Suddenly she remembered her sister Rebecca's description of Cotton Mather wiping the sweat from his face as he emerged from the jail. Goody Glover had been imprisoned for witchcraft four years ago, in 1688. Cotton Mather had gone to the jail to persuade her to repent. Later she was hanged. How would that feel, Mary wondered, to be hanged, as she transferred the chopped onions and potatoes to a pot that hung by a trammel over the stone floor in front of the fireplace. Would hanging by the neck, be as quick as a twist to the neck? She'd seen chickens' necks both twisted and cut. Once, when her father had taken an axe to a chicken, he'd asked her to hold it down over a stump. The bird had then leaped around without its head for several seconds. Rebecca had told her that Goody Glover was innocent of witchcraft. She had not herself known Goody Glover, but her heart went out to the woman's poor family. The dying itself was not the worst. If innocent, she would join Christ in eternity—but pity the family left behind. How would the children fare without their mother to care for them, and the daughters assumed to be lured into their mother's devil worship too? Puritans believed that it was passed down through generations of women. The whole village would be against the children, looking in their pale little faces or their puny arms for signs. For the witches' bodies were marked. Sometimes an extra nipple or a shaped birthmark would appear on them.

Mary donned her heaviest shawl and went out into the frozen yard. The snow had stopped and the wind was down. Only a few dark twigs and blades stuck out of the snow, remnants of last year's bushes and weeds. Between their house and the road, the solitary spruce tree that she favored,

the one she had asked Isaac to leave standing in their meadow, was bending over, weighed down by snow. She noticed that some of the blue-green needles had a frozen crust. She checked the beef fat suet she'd put out on the spruce branch for the juncos and tree sparrows that wintered nearby. Her husband, also an admirer of birds, kept a shelter for them in a corner of their cleared land, of conifer cover and dense shrubs. She heard the *fee bee* of a black-capped chickadee as he flew to the frozen spruce branch.

She slogged over to the chicken coop. Isaac had loaded hay onto the shelves, and their son Jacob had helped his father to install wooden walls on a frame to protect the chickens from the chill. She gathered three eggs. One was for the sugar cake she would serve with crab apple jelly. She stopped suddenly as she heard a wolf howl. The Puritans feared wolves. They decapitated those they captured and nailed the wolf heads to posts. For some reason, she thought back to the stories of Mary Dyer, the Quaker who braved the elements in her three treks from Rhode Island to Boston. She'd been exiled and banned from returning home. Mary's own mother, Joanna Blessing, now in her grave, had kept her girls apprised of Mary Dyer's courage, by repeating this story to them, but she also warned against Dyer's outrageous persistence. Dyer, knowing that she would be executed, came back a third time to protest the unjust law that banned Quakers from the region. She had been reprieved from hanging the second time she came, only after she'd ascended the scaffold next to the bodies of the two Quakers hanged moments earlier.<sup>4</sup>

Imagine braving the forest full of dangers, like wolves, bears and Indians, to die as a martyr for justice. Mary Esty recalled this incident many times. She'd talked to her daughter Hannah about human obedience to God's call, and those who died for their beliefs. Indeed, when the Quaker woman walked to the gallows amid drumbeats sounded to drown out any conversation, she had spoken these words, "I've dwelled in paradise these past days." If that were so, surely Quaker Mary had placed her true faith above her fear of men and even her fear of death. Mary Esty also knew about Anne Hutchinson, who was expelled from the Boston Puritan community because she spoke of salvation through faith and not works. She walked slowly back to the house, shook the shawl and hung it on the wooden peg near the door. The thick belt that Isaac had used for a door hinge squeaked in the frozen air, so she fastened the latch quickly. Mary checked the crab apples simmering on the hearth. Hannah would help her strain the apple liquid through the muslin by balancing the heavy

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Adams Drake, *New England Legends and Folklore* (Edison, N.J.: Castle Books, 1993), 36-45.



beaker while Mary held the cloth. They'd add sugar and boil it until the jelly set.

### *Angry Samuel Parris*

Meanwhile, Samuel Parris was trying to work out his sermon. It was hard, even to think much less write, in the freezing cold of the parish house. The huge kitchen fireplace gave off some warmth, but there was not enough firewood to keep the fire banked properly so that it would give off heat to penetrate other rooms. Angriely he shoved his papers under his arm, snatched the candle, and stomped into the kitchen where he sat down at the table.

"Get these cooking things out of my way, Tituba!" he ordered. Tituba scrambled to pull away the utensils she'd been using to peel potatoes, onions and carrots for stew. She'd thought that the family would be warmed by the broth, and that it would do the mistress good. Also, John Indian, her husband, might get to come home tonight from the work Parris had lent him out to do in the colonies. Tituba knew that Parris made a pretty penny off of the back of her strong husband.

"Get that look off your face, woman!" grumbled Parris. "You are lucky that I purchased both you and John, and that you both have a roof to sleep under!" At that moment, the ink bottle tipped precariously.

"Now see what you almost made me do!" he shouted. Tituba backed away and tread quickly up the stairs to the bedrooms. Parris heard her footsteps over his head and he caught the murmur of Elizabeth's voice. His wife had a rich, warm voice; it was one of the features that had attracted him. After Deborah died, he had lost all interest in women; it was rare that any female in the Boston colony stood out enough to capture his attention; Elizabeth was the only one. Colonists disapproved of his marriage to an older woman, but he was taken by her quiet charm. To his surprise and delight, Elizabeth responded to the marital embrace in such a way that he was more satisfied than ever before, each time they had sex. God had created woman to share man's pleasure in this and in all of life, or so he had believed in their early marriage when he still trusted women. He smiled in memory of Elizabeth in her pure white garments on their wedding night. She looked like a young girl. Then the reality of her birth injuries returned full force, and he recalled the damage to her urinary tract so that it leaked without control. He had not made love to Elizabeth since their last child was six months old. At that time, he realized she would not

heal. Moreover, her odious smell required frequent sponge baths administered by Tituba that used up precious firewood to heat the water. And this, when they could not spare a single log! No matter where he turned, the bitterness of another obstacle assailed him. He had learned that females are inferior to males, and that their very presence weakens men's resolve.

Just then, Abigail came into the kitchen. The funny, quick and shrewd girl reminded him of her father, the friend he'd lost years ago. This man was a distant relative, and their blood bond enriched their friendship. When the man and his wife both died within months of each other, Parris had taken Abigail to live with his family, against his wife's warning. Elizabeth claimed that Abigail would be a bad influence upon their daughter Betty, who was years younger than Abigail. She told him that the girl was full of mischief and that she was also dishonest. Somehow Abigail could make their adventures into Betty's fault for thinking them up in the first place. Parris could not take that claim seriously. Indeed, their mischief seemed more humorous than significant. Besides, his whole life now was a burden, and Abigail's venture seemed to lighten the tone of the house. Both girls followed Tituba around in hopes that she would tell them about her life in Barbados, and he would hear them talking in the kitchen while they worked. He'd have to tell Tituba to cease talking about the islands, full of evil as they were.

### *Conflict with Mercy Lewis*

Back in the Esty kitchen, Mary stirred the jelly carefully. She looked up to see her son Jacob stumble sleepily into the room. She asked him to sit down and to awaken more slowly. Instead, he walked back upstairs to the bedroom. Jacob tended to be rebellious, and Mary had to handle him carefully. She remembered a day last October, when Jacob had accompanied her to the Topsfield market. Mary had reminded him of his father's warning: don't get involved with any girl that you wouldn't want to marry. Jacob had grimaced at the time. He and his mother were both thinking about pretty Mercy Lewis, whom Jacob had talked to during the previous Sabbath at the meetinghouse. Mary decided not to tell Jacob that Mercy Lewis was hardly eligible to marry him, because she was country cousin and kin-servant to the Putnams, the notorious and hostile Salem clan. Much of the Putnam anger was directed against Mary's own kin, the Hobbes-Esty-Howe-Towne-Wildes families, in Topsfield, because

of a well known land dispute. When Isaac had joined the others, and had testified that he had witnessed John Putnam cutting down trees on land that the Putnams did not own, they had retaliated by claiming that Isaac had openly lied in court.<sup>5</sup>

Yes, she thought, Jacob is rebellious. On that October day he flirted with Mercy who was about his same age. Mercy's eyes clearly showed her emotions. She had sought Jacob's attentions, but when they came to her, she deflected him by pursuing him too aggressively and scaring him off. As Mary came back with a tool she had acquired by trading some eggs, Mary had seen Jacob and Mercy together, arguing loudly on the green. Mary had just been stung by yet another insult from Judge Acorn, a former suitor whom she had rejected years ago. Acorn didn't miss an opportunity to put her down in public as retaliation for her refusal to marry him. Mary knew he was a follower of John Winthrop, with whom she and Isaac partly disagreed, especially on the "just" separation of the social classes. She was thinking about Winthrop's influential document, "Model of Christianity," and its overt intent to encourage obedience to the authorities in the early Puritan settlement. A few yards away Jacob Esty had poked Mercy Lewis in the shoulder, and the angry girl turned away. Mary couldn't hear what they said but she hurried across the road.

"What's happening here? Mercy, surely you don't want to go away mad?"

"Your son seems to think he knows everything about branding tools," Mercy muttered.

"They're pretty important to prove ownership of cattle," Jacob said. "Last winter some of our cows wandered off near the stream—you know, the one near the land your relatives, the Putnams, think they own—and the only proof of ownership we had was the brand on 'em." Jacob turned to his mother for agreement. Mary nodded.

"Mercy, you look so well with a blush on your cheeks. I do believe you've grown into a very pretty girl," she said to soothe her. Mary put out her hand to tuck a stray curl inside Mercy's bonnet. Then she patted her shoulder. But Mercy pulled back abruptly. It seemed she feared the older woman might embrace her. Mary was taken aback by her hostility. Quickly she stepped back two paces, and held her basket with both hands. Mercy spluttered through clenched teeth.

"Well, Jacob doesn't think I'm pretty at all. He refused to come walking with me just now, when I wanted to show him the blazing sugar

<sup>5</sup> Peter Charles Hoffer, *The Devil's Disciples: Makers of the Salem Witchcraft Trials* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 46.

maples. They're quite a sight," she went on. She didn't say that his dark, glossy curls and dancing brown eyes had kept her awake several nights, and that it'd taken her hours to come up with some plan to get him to talk with her, in a place away from prying eyes. The Putnams, with whom she lived as a kind of poor relative, really a servant, would be sure to hear of her doings in town.

"Jacob's dad told us both to come right home. Truly, Mercy, Isaac needs this tool to finish a job," Mary said gently, smiling at Mercy's frowning face. "We'd best be getting along now, but it was nice to see you."

"I wish I could say the same," Mercy whispered to their retreating backs. *But you, Mistress Mary, you don't believe I'm good enough for your fancy son. You don't know it, but I've heard talk about your singing in the twilight, as you feed your animals. You even give fish heads to the stray cats. You don't even dress proper like the other matrons. That rose colored shawl is too bright at your age. Mercy's quick transition to anger from embarrassment made her feel less awkward. She kicked at the stones in the dirt as she wandered home alone. And it was such a beautiful morning. Too bad it was wasted on that snob Jacob.*

Back in her kitchen, in the present February morning, Mary recalled the argument Isaac had had with Jacob a month ago as they were washing up for supper. Jacob was saying aloud some dangerous, rebellious thoughts: that specters couldn't exist at all, and that only crazy slaves like Tiutuba in Salem could believe in them. Everybody knew she was off her rocker like all them Carribs. When Isaac remonstrated with him, saying it was too easy to dismiss specters as crazy visions, Jacob yelled as his father that he was sick of the talk about God and right living anyways. Before he could say that he wasn't sure he even believed in God, and earn himself a beating, Mary had intervened.

"Now, you men just hungry, that's all. Time to eat before a tooth gets knocked out!" she teased, as she patted her husband's arm. He gave her a look and she raised her eyebrows. "I've made your favorite bread. And there's fresh butter. You like this bread best, dear heart!" she kissed Isaac's cheek. She knew Jacob and Isaac couldn't stay mad when their stomachs stopped growling. The family had then gone into the house where Joshua had cleared the table of his study items, so their food could be set out.

Now, in the freezing February, Mary worried about Jacob's shaky beliefs. She had tried to help his faith to grow, by exposing him early to stories about the kindness of Jesus, mainly to counteract the ferocity of the sermons in the meeting house, before the new and more compassionate

minister had arrived, the one before Parris. Sundays, in his childhood, Jacob would be too frightened to sleep, after hearing about the punishments of hell that awaited those who were ensnared by the devil. As a little boy, he'd needed comforting in order to doze off. Those times had made Mary wonder too, about the wisdom of trying to scare folks into virtue. Fear was not a good motive. But she had to admit she was a little afraid for Jacob, now that he was questioning the very existence of God Almighty. She'd told him never to talk like that around anyone but herself. As his mother, she could forgive him, and try to train him up in the right way. But what was the right way to train him to believe in God? Fortunately, Hannah, now that she was 25, could at least help her to train him to keep his mouth shut. Hannah had a sweet disposition and she gave her mother no trouble.

### Mercy Lewis' Bloody Past

**T**riangles of her mother's skull gleam white beneath the clotted gore hanging from the Indian warrior's blade. Visions of blood soak her brain, and piercing screams shred her dreams. How can she get them to stop? Each time she tries to forget the visions, to better herself, to make a friend, to earn some shillings, she is stymied. Why do these nightmares of failed efforts, and of murder, follow her? What did she do to deserve this? Will she always be helpless before life, as her poor mother was helpless before the knife?

Mercy's depression manifested itself in loss of appetite. With each lost pound, she looked more ethereal and elfin. Her long hair curled in tendrils around her wide eyes, and her limbs resembled those of Ann Putnam's stick dolls. Mercy never had a new doll of her own. She was an orphan and the Putnams never let her forget it. They lost sympathy with her suffering about the murders of her family. No one had to tell her that they didn't care anymore, because she was told by their downcast eyes and quick changes of subject whenever she brought up the deaths. It'd been several years now, since anyone had listened if she talked about that day in Maine when the Indian raid began. What can she do but dream about it? How can she rid herself of these traumas? Mercy feared that one day, she would be unable to control the visions, that she would live in them all the time. Then she would go mad.

That afternoon, Mercy heard about the fits of Abigail Williams and Betty Parris from Ann, her distant cousin. She said that the whole Village

whispered about them. Some said the girls were faking the fits, but others were convinced they came from the devil's disciples. Satan was walking right into the homes of Salem. The winter darkened with the evil footsteps of the demon. Mercy wondered if maybe the devil was her problem too? Satan could cause these visions to occur, and recur, and repeat themselves in a vicious cycle of horror. Satan loved to make people suffer, just as she was suffering. The fact that she was always ignored by those closest to her, the Putnam family, just proved the point. Satan could make people deny what was right before their eyes. He could make them blind. Maybe now the girls—Abigail and Betty—would listen to her. Since they'd been abused by spectral spirits sent by the devil, working through villagers, maybe now they would understand her struggles. Maybe she wouldn't be so alone anymore.

She picked at the wool unraveling on her sleeve. Her aunt had told her to stop picking at it because she would not get another wool dress until after the family's new clothes had been planned. First, the Putnams had to get their new clothes, handmade slowly and beautifully, and only after that could she have her own dress fitted. Last winter, Ann had chosen the rose dye for the wool yarn they'd made from the sheep cuttings. Mercy wanted green, but her aunt said those colors were more trouble to make. The rosy red of madder, grown in the garden, was easier to make for Ann's choice, whereas St. John's Wort and foxgloves had to be mixed with prunus leaves to make the green color. Mercy had offered to find the plants and to make the dye herself, because green wouldn't keep bringing the color of blood back into her mind. But her aunt had said *Nonsense, Mercy, you must learn to control your thoughts better than that!* It was always that way. Nothing she wanted ever came out right. If she was second to everyone else, maybe Satan saw her an easier target. She felt very vulnerable. That night she heard the wind howling outside the Putnam home, the black cats yowling, and when she finally got up to look out the window, she could see witches on their broomsticks riding across the moon. She covered up her head and sang to herself to keep up her courage until morning light.

When Mercy finally fell into a deep sleep, it was time to get up. Her head ached and the frozen water in her wash bowl stung her eyes. The family made her sleep under the window on the second floor, in the hallway at the top of the stairs between the two large bedrooms. She was always cold, as the window let in the winter air through the uncovered glass, and the stairwell created another draft. Unlike the windows in the bedrooms, her window had no covering at all. She shivered each winter

night until sleep finally came. Often she could overhear the complaints of Thomas Putnam in the next bedroom with his wife Ann Carr Putnam, her aunt who was known for her mental instability. He would rail against his half-brother Joseph Putnam, son of Mary Varen, his father's second wife. Joseph had inherited most of his wealthy father's estate.<sup>6</sup> Thomas and Ann Putnam both hated Mary Varen.

Mercy was often ill, due to the constant cold and dampness. Her clothing never seemed to warm her. Her misery was increased by a loneliness too profound to dissipate even when she was in the company of others. But somehow, when she was with the younger girls, and when they were talking about spectral spirits, she felt as if she were on the same plane with them, sharing in the same reality. This feeling was precious to her, as it made her feel part of a community. Mercy desperately wanted to feel a part of the same world as the other girls. Her own world, the one she escaped to, when she wanted to go into trance or absentmindedness, as Ann Senior would call it before she beat her, sometimes her own world would warm her with sunlight. But when her uncle abused her during the oral sex he forced upon her, when she felt she would choke to death, the world she escaped to could become dark and foreboding. Probably that was because he would cuff her ears when he could hear her choke and gag. He would sharply knock his elbows into the tender part of her ears. He would hiss his hatred at Mary Varen's, his own stepmother, whom he momentarily imagined her to be. But the good thing about that was, if she timed it right, she could pull her head off his tool when his hands were lifted for a second from pushing her head down. Last night she had rolled away, striking her shoulder against the bedstead where he sat, making a noise that woke her crazy aunt in the next room. She rolled under the bed and her uncle stood up quickly and moved, catlike, down the stairwell as her aunt opened the bedroom door.

"Is that you again, Mercy, falling off the bed again? Will I never get any sleep, with you making such a racket?" Ann Putnam, the elder, yanked Mercy off the floor and threw her onto the bed.

"Now be quiet, girl, if you want to keep a roof over your head! And shut up those guttural sobs and coughs. You ant sick enough to make cough up noises to clear your chest. Quit, I said!" and she struck the girl sharply across the face. Mercy had fallen back onto the bed, rolling into the pillow and holding her breath. When her uncle crept back up the stairs awhile later, he crept past her prostrate form. Months ago he had

<sup>6</sup> Persis McMillan, 123.

threatened to call her a liar, to throw her out of the only home she had, if she dared to tell on him. Mercy had no choice but to keep still.

But it was small Ann Putnam, Jr. who lured Mercy, and not with affection. Ann absorbed her mother's obsession with the dead. After her marriage her mother had followed her own dead sister Mary, into Salem Village when Mary married the first minister, James Bayley. Many dead babies belonging to both women had left their mark upon Ann Putnam's mind.<sup>7</sup> Ann Sr. had taken her little namesake to the cemetery, and there reminded her of the Beast in Revelations which they'd read together. Small Ann seemed to take the dark side into herself with a glittering fascination.

Mercy's role, as the family servant, was to do the odious housework such as emptying the slops and taking care of the cattle. A lady would not do these chores. She also had to haul the wet laundry and the firewood. But small Ann would sometimes help her lift the baskets of apples and potatoes from the root cellar, and whisper about other girls they both knew, scary little Betsy Parris and her cousin Abigail Williams. Abigail was more to Mercy's liking because of her age. Abigail was eleven whereas Betsy was only nine. Abigail could always think up things to do. It was never boring to be around her.

Mercy recalled the only schooling she ever had, during her move to Maine. Then came the raids in which her parents were slaughtered, and her time with the family of former Bay colony minister, George Burroughs. She'd heard much gossip in his home too. Mercy had learned her ciphers from Mary Esty, at the small catechism school she had run for the neighborhood girls when the Esty daughters Sarah and Hannah were little. Mercy liked the company of the girls, except for the Sarah who married Vibber, the good looking man who, it was said, forced his servants to have sex much as Thomas Putnam did. Sarah Vibber had bright dark eyes and a flawless face except for her large nose. But Sarah Vibber, she deserved a cheating husband because she was so mean. Mercy felt that her Aunt Ann Putnam was also mean, but in a crazy way. Someone who thought about death all the time was bound to go mad. Mercy hoped that her obsession with the massacre would not drive her over the edge like her aunt, who concentrated on dead babies and her own dead sister. At least Mercy did not think all the time about her lost parent, though she couldn't control the nightmares. Now that Sarah Vibber, she was a living nightmare. Although she had grown into a pretty woman, she dressed

<sup>7</sup> Marion Starkey, *The Devil in Massachusetts: A Modern Enquiry into the Salem Witch Trials*, 1949. (New York: Anchor Books), 36.



funny and spoke with a peculiar accent. No one knew where it had come from; perhaps it was an affectation.

Sarah Vibber had always calculated her cruelty. Once Mercy saw her put a small dove into a container and bang it on the table and floor, and laugh wildly through her huge nose when the poor creature fell out unconscious. Sarah liked to use her power over other people. Mercy had gone to her home once, and once only, for a husking bee. While they were husking the corn, Sarah made fun of Sarah Good, the town beggar, until she, Mercy, reminded her of the time at the catechism school years ago, when the teacher, Mary Esty, had corrected her for gossiping about the pipe Sarah Good smoked and the fires she supposedly started in haystacks. Mercy had even recalled Mary's words: *Look for the bad and you will find it even if it's not there. Look for the good in other people and see God's flower in them, and help it grow.* At the husking bee, Sarah Vibber got this look of disgust on her face and she said, *A lot that woman knows about life. She's always had it easy. Anyways, there's plenty of bad, she just won't face it.* The women had listened to Sarah complain about their methods of husking the corn. There were only three of them; no one else had wanted to go help her. Sarah Vibber pursed her lips and sat in silence; they all did. Mercy couldn't think of anything to say. This hateful silence went on for what seemed like hours. Finally, when Sarah's child started calling from the bedroom, she got up, threw down her corn, and said angrily, *You can all go home now anyways; you ant helping me much.* Mercy had looked over at the other girl and they both rose at the same time and sought the door. Sarah Vibber had not even said goodbye, much less, thank you.

Mercy thought about the flowers they'd gathered in the woods at the catechism school. She recalled the sigh of the pines, the bed of pine needles on the forest floor, and the pristine white of the bloodroot flowers that came up in through the snow in early spring. The buds would open up during the day and close at night. They were so tender, their little faces turned up hopefully at the spring sunlight. Mary Esty had showed them, in the catechism school, how to make violets a ground cover under tall pink and rose rhododendrons, and how to propagate them by seed and by dividing the root stalks in the fall. Mary always pointed out the different kinds of violets to the girls. She liked the downy yellow violets best, her daughter Sarah the blue flowered violets, while Mercy favored the sweet white ones. Anything purified of blood red would catch her fancy. Once when she told the reason for her preference to Mary, the fact that blood reminded her of the massacre of her parents, the older woman had put her arms around her and stroked her hair. *God will heal you, His Son our Lord*

*died for us, and He suffered everything that we on earth do. You, Mercy, are not alone in your suffering.* Many times Mercy remembered these kind words, though she doubted our Lord ever suffered rape or nigh onto choking to death, as she did many nights.

Mercy wondered why Mary wouldn't let her say that her bull was sired by theirs. She could've gotten a better price for the bull if the farmer who bought it, after it was near grown, had thought the sire was the Esty bull. But Mary was so strict about the truth. She had thought for sure that Mary, her one and only friend among the adults, would've supported her in that effort, knowing how much she needed the money. Mary had always given extra fabric, food, and even ink supplies to Mercy so that she could practice her letters. But when it came to saying the bull sired her calf, oh, now, that would've been a major sin. Mercy still ached to think of that rejection. She didn't think she'd ever really sinned, and that wouldn't have been so bad, since no one knew who the sire was. It could've been their bull. She wondered whether Mary had told Jacob about it, and maybe that was the reason Jacob didn't want to walk with her that beautiful sunny afternoon last October. Maybe Mary had told Jacob that she, Mercy, was a liar. Mercy's cheeks reddened when she remembered the tone in which Jacob had spoken to her. With contempt, that's what it was, contempt. As if he, Jacob Esty, were too good for Mercy. Just because she had no money. And the one time she was sure to have earned some, was blocked by his own mother. She wondered which Esty family member had found the corpse of Tituba's frozen cat. When she herself had found the dead cat in the forest, she took it to the large Esty house. She hoped whoever found it had a scare. They were quite a pair, those two. Annoyed, Mercy let her mind go to other failures.

Another time Mary had taught her catechism students the scripture where Christ walked on water. Mercy recalled this vividly, as it seemed to give her a way out of her wretched memories. She'd tried so hard to put faith into practice. But it just wouldn't come when bidden, this faith. Mary had related the storm, the danger of the disciples stranded in the boat, their fear that it was a ghost walking toward them on the water. Peter called out to Christ, "Lord, if it is really you, tell me to come to you on the water." "Come," He said. Then Peter got down from the boat, walked on water and came forward to him. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "Why did you doubt?" Mary Esty had used this teaching to emphasize the importance of faith, that faith could save you while fear could



doom you. Mercy had recognized herself in the scripture. She was always afraid, but if faith could save her, she would try her hardest to achieve it. The trouble was, faith didn't stop the sexual abuse, and faith didn't stop the nightmares of the Maine massacres of her parents. Sometimes Mercy hated Mary because it seemed faith came easily to her, just like her marriage, her children, and prosperity.

Mercy had heard about Tiruba, the slave from Barbados who lived with the Putnams with her man, John Indian. Tiruba was teaching fortunetelling to Betty Parris and Abigail Williams. Little scary Betty idolized the black woman. Now for that, Mercy could not blame her. Betty's own mother, Elizabeth Parris, smelly, skinny and ill much of the time, never said a kind word to her own little girl. Just like Aunt Ann Putnam to her, to Mercy. Oh yes, Mercy knew all about living with a woman who had no use for you. Made it hard to get through the day. But the nights were the worst. Mercy knew she'd have to do a lot of work today to satisfy her aunt, though she was tired, so tired. Yesterday she hadn't finished grinding the wheat grains they'd kept in bags in the root cellar.

"Mercy, get your lazy body down here!" screamed Aunt Ann from below the stairs. As Mercy dragged herself out of bed, the draft from the icy window bit into her tender flesh. She noticed black bruises on her arms from where her rapist, Uncle Thomas, had grabbed her last night. She pulled the ragged shift over her head and laced her stays, placing a heavy shawl over her shoulders and woolen stockings over toes blue with cold. She remembered more about Mary's stories. Why did she love them so much? She knew that Mary's favorites were based upon the parables. A better memory followed. With Mary's hug around her as the first image, Mercy recalled one about the wheat and the tares. She often pictured the day when Mary hugged her, because she could count on two hands the number of hugs she'd ever had since the day when *she came to a gap where the trees had been particularly felled, and here she found that the lingering twilight was explained...by diffused light for many hours before a brilliant aurora. Suddenly, a swift shadow...writhed through the air before her, and she felt herself instantly seized and borne aloft...the monster reared his head and flared the fiery eyeballs upon her.*<sup>8</sup> Mercy shook her head, refusing to give in to the ghastly memory of the Indian massacre, and tried to focus on the parable Mary told. As she sat down upon the bed to pull on her shoes, she again heard Mary's voice in the summer morning of blue and gold daisies.

<sup>8</sup> Harriet Prescott Spofford, "Circumstance," *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, 774-5.

"A farmer, who was really Christ our Lord, sowed some precious seed in the ground. But the enemy, you know—the Devil—came that night and threw weeds into the lot with the seeds. When the farmer's servants, the angels who attend Christ, asked if they should pull out the weeds that began to grow with the wheat, he told them to wait until both were grown. "Then" said the Son of Man, Our Lord, "we will gather the weeds first and burn them, and later harvest the wheat." Mercy remembered that Mary had told them that the wheat was themselves, the little girls who paid attention to catechism and tried to increase their faith, who told themselves daily, "Dearest Lord, I believe in you, and I know you are real." The weeds were other children who didn't bother to pray by themselves to God, but rather allowed themselves to think any old which way about life around them. These are the weeds thrown in by the Enemy. They will be hard to remove from the wheat, but the angels, who come to the harvest, can easily tell the difference and will gather the wheat in the end. "Don't you want to go with the angels, my darlings?" Mary would ask. Mercy remembered the hug Mary gave her when she had called out, "Yes, Yes, I want to go with the angels!" Sarah Vibber had said to her, as they walked home together, "What if Mary ISN'T one of the angels?" and then smiled her dreadful smile that set her big nose twitching. Mercy still wondered what she meant. Surely Ann Putnam and her scary husband were none of the angels. Mercy hurried down the cold stairs to the kitchen.

### Mary Remembers Mercy

Mary was stirring corn meal for the dinner bread when she recalled Mercy's request. The Putnam servant girl had asked her to sign a document stating that the Esty prize bull had sired a calf belonging to Mercy's own heifer. The Putnams had acquired the heifer, already gravid, at the Topsfield market, and gave it to her instead of money. Mercy came to the Esty house one day when she knew the men were at a barn raising. Mary was shocked at her request.

"Why'd you ask me to do a thing like that? Everyone knows our bull was out the west wood during that time. We had him penned up while we were planting. The bull had just pulled the plows through the soil after the rains quit. Mercy, why'd you ask me to fake that siring?"

"You know I could fetch more money for the calf if the Salem folk thought it was sired by your bull. Who knows but that it could be true

anyways? Plus, I'd give you some of the silver I'd sell it for. It could be a nice nest egg for your new grandbaby that's fixin to come. Everyone knows your son Isaac, married to Abigail Kimball two years ago, that they're expecting a baby any time now."

"Mercy, don't the Putnams give you money to spend? So that you don't have to fake documents to get it?" Mercy's line of kinfolk did relate her to the Thomas Putnams despite her orphaned servant status.

"They think the clothes on my back and the food in my bowl's good enough for me. Why, I wouldn't even have the heifer if I hadn't broken my back caring for all their cattle. That was how they paid me: by giving me the heifer. So I have to make the most that I can from her. Come now, Mrs. Esty, no one has to know 'cept you and me."

"Mercy, God will know. You don't want God to know that we did a dishonest thing? Do you want to face afterlife with a sin on your soul? Truth telling may not make money, but the stain on your soul isn't worth the lie." Mercy frowned at the older woman and flounced out the door. The old feeling of anguish gripped the girl, the one that smote her heart when she felt rejected, when the expectation of something good was pulled out from under her. Mercy knew this feeling would be followed by visions of her mother under the Indian scalpel, visions she couldn't articulate. Always she ended up feeling helpless.

For her part, Mary pondered the outcome of this episode, and the feeling of fear began to clutch at her stomach again. She'd been battling it for some time now. She believed fear to be a sin, because minds and hearts should be set on faith, and hope in salvation. She thought of a passage from scripture, one describing God's love for humanity. "I will answer him and care for him. I am like a green pine tree, your truthfulness comes from me." (Hosea 14:8) *If God sent His prophet to speak His Word to us, then we should listen and believe His promises. He hears our prayers, He answers and cares for us.*

However, the scent of the fruit she was peeling for their meal took her back to a real trauma. She couldn't seem to control her mind now, but maybe God was leading her back to it again. His Presence was with her, she knew; and she could face the trauma squarely, with Him holding her hand. The catastrophe had happened two years ago, in the spring, in late May, when she'd come back from visiting a sick woman who lived down the road.

## Sarah Good's Story

The sun was getting low, and the lovely lavender twilight starting to fall. Mary stopped her swift walk through the fragrant sweet grass meadows, by the fence, to watch the sunset. She put down the package of scriptural readings with her name on it, *Mary Towne*, in her English aunt's calligraphic script. The sick woman had borrowed these writings. She herself looked forward to re-reading these writings, especially Winthrop's *Modell of Christianity* that called the Puritan community the City on the Hill, a new Jerusalem, the City of God, because she wanted to re-think the views he expressed. She thought affectionately of the elder woman who, even in debilitating illness, thought to prepare the package for her, even to using the very dear ink she had made herself.

Mary had leaned up against a tall oak when suddenly she heard moans near her feet. She looked down to see the violated, nearly dead body of Sarah Good, the homeless woman whose child, Dorcas, often begged food with her.<sup>9</sup> It would be two days before Sarah was conscious enough to tell her story, that while she was bending over to pick some herbs, suddenly two ropelike arms bound her fast, one dirty hand covering her mouth. She couldn't scream, but she could bite. She tasted coppery metallic blood in her teeth. She caught a glimpse of wild opal eyes and blonde hair just before the wiry youth knocked her in the head with his other fist. She fell to her knees, and he kicked her in the chest, sending her sprawling into the young grass. The attacker pulled her arms almost from their sockets in his haste to get her onto her stomach so as to avoid her eyes again. He didn't want her to identify him. She never got a second look at his eyes. He tore off her skirts and raped her from the rear, paralyzing her with searing pain as her inner tender tissue ripped from the dry grinding assaults. After she lost consciousness, he turned her over and raped her again and again from the front, lacerating her even more. He even fell asleep on top of her. As the dawn was breaking, he awoke and loped away. Sarah spoke of it repeatedly and couldn't seem to let go of it. Mary and Hannah decided to keep her isolated because they knew the town and village men might turn it against her and add fuel to her already low reputation. They would latch onto some feigned indignation and punish Sarah with it, as well as those who had helped her out of compassion.

<sup>9</sup> Carol F. Karlson, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), 127-8. The facts about Sarah Good do not include the rape. It did, however, probably occur, given her unprotected lifestyle. Sarah begged both food and shelter for herself and her little girl, after she was deprived of her inheritance.

When it had happened years ago, Mary knew she would never stop re-living the shock of discovering the bloody wounds and bruises on Sarah's poor broken body. Indeed she had relived it, so many times, that it now replayed in her memory without evoking the terrible feelings or physical emotions that used to come alongside it. The idea or concept of fear itself, however, could bring it back, as it did just now. The two seemed to be linked or fused, both the fear and the shock at finding the raped woman. When she had understood that fear, the feeling of fear that paralyzed and blinded one to injustice and above all, to God's presence, was a sin because it was a tool of Satan, she knew that this exposure to rape was her direct encounter with evil. It taught her, more than any sermon, the destructiveness of evil that would lead inevitably to death. At the same time, she reasoned, God's goodness would help her, and Sarah, and she would hang onto that hope. On the other hand, if she gave in to fear, she would be letting Satan win the battle. Why couldn't the Salem and Topsfield ministers see, that in their insistence upon hell and punishment, they were instilling fear which helped the demon? Mary knew that it would do no good to confront the Puritan elders, so she nurtured her faith through prayer and gratitude. She battled fear by understanding its effects upon her and others. She never told Isaac about the rape, but they often talked about faith and redemption.

Long ago, in that lime green spring, Sarah Good had opened her eyes the next morning. The sun woke her up with its warmth upon her naked breast, covered as it was with dried blood from her beaten face and mouth. Lower on her torso, the blood had run down her legs and seeped into the young grass, staining it purple. She turned her head into the crushed pink and crimson columbines. Their scent made no mark on her consciousness. In her agony she grabbed handfuls of the blossoms as she rolled over and over the foot tall stems. She stopped rolling when her nose hit the dark, spotted stem of a curious hooded flower, an Indian turnip or Jack-in-the-pulpit. Her mother used to extract the starch of these plants and cook their tuberous roots. Her mother had left her an inheritance that was stolen from her. Sarah was so bruised and bloody from the beating that she forgot her little girl. Soon the memory of the child would return and scare her into a panic.

"My dear Sarah, what demon did this to you? Was it a red man? An Indian?" asked the desperate and tearful Mary as she dragged Sarah up to her house.

"No, no, it was a white man. He had pale blonde hair and wild opal eyes. But I only caught a glimpse of his face. He wasn't someone I recognized."

"If the men find out, no telling what will happen. Likely they'll go on a rampage and get themselves killed. It's a good thing they're all over at Salem village doing some bargaining. They're not expected back even today. Come inside, poor Sarah and let me clean you."

All day Mary and Hannah had fussed over Sarah. They had massaged her poor back, put hot packs on her limbs, and cleansed her wounds. Mary put healing herbs inside of her after disinfecting with warm water and oil as best she could. Sarah doubted that she could ever sit down again, even in an outhouse, never mind effectively rid herself of bodily waste again. She kept asking if the body poisons would kill her. Again and again, Mary reassured her that God would heal her, that her body would be restored. Although she would have scars, the pain would go away, she promised. While she kept saying these things Mary began to believe them herself. Suddenly she thought of the toddler, Dorcas. When she asked Sarah about her, the woman jumped off the bed and raced out of the room in a panic. Mary restrained her while Hannah soothed her with promises that she'd be located. Mary went out into the woods near where she'd found Sarah and, an hour later, discovered two year old Dorcas asleep under a pine tree.

Next morning, Mary and Sarah talked about the change in social status, that poverty brought to people. Sarah complained of the injustice especially facing women, who had little to do with family income because their work was similar in all households. Unlike the servants who worked with cattle in the fields, women normally supervised the food preparation, the herb gardens and the color dyes for fabrics, the weaving, often the milking and egg gathering as well. Puritans believed God rewarded virtue with prosperity. If a family became poor they lost the respect of the community, assuming as it did, at least in theory, that the family deserved their poverty. Sarah Good's father had been wealthy but he died. There was a mixup about the inheritance. Puritans usually left land to their sons, while the women would get a share of the material items. During her marriage, Sarah Good had lost her wealth; as she grew older, she was reduced to begging. She had a belligerent, coarse response to her misfortune. She'd been out in the weather so much that her skin tanned to leather. Her ragged clothes were dirty and she smelled badly. She had taken to smoking a pipe that sometimes spouted coals; these sparks might start small fires. Salem Village and Topsfield residents did not welcome her arrival.

Mary decided to send Sarah and Dorcas to her cousin who lived several hours away. She and her daughter Hannah put the paupers in the ox

cart, covered them with quilts, and took turns driving the oxen the ten miles. Horses were still rare in the colonies. The Acorns, and two other breeders, had only just begun breeding horses from the original pair brought aboard ships from England. Earlier in the trade, the mature horses on board had died because they couldn't survive in the holds below deck with the cows. But the colts and foals, just weaned, were small enough to withstand the ship rocking in storms. Provided they had enough liquid, oats, and grooming, the strongest of them could totter onto the New England wharves some six or more weeks after leaving England. The Acorns would become one of the richest and most powerful families due to their careful horse breeding. They could only produce a very few each decade. It would still be many years until the northern states got horses. Comanche Indians in the Southwest would later reproduce the horses introduced to them by the Spaniards. Meanwhile, the oxen pulled the carts, and most heavy transport took place on the settlements along the eastern coast and inland river lines.

In the home of Mary's cousin, ten miles distant, Sarah Good could heal in peace without the Towne men knowing what had happened to her. All feared the response of their men; loss of control would follow their suspicions of young men in surrounding villages. The towns were tinderboxes for the outbreak of arguments that flamed into battles. Women weren't sure the men wouldn't blame them partly for the trouble, due to their helping Sarah in the first place. The women were bound in sisterly silence to protect one of their own despite her ruined status. Mary never questioned the wisdom of this decision. She'd seen the havoc that came along with physical violence. Her father had slaughtered a bull that broke through the fence and gored her young brother's arm. Mary would never forget the sight of him, crazy with rage, hacking and dismembering the still living creature, froth at his own mouth and eyes bloodshot. Not for the first time, she thanked God that all her siblings had inherited their mother Joanna's ability to restrain the temper that had come from their father.

### Judge Acorn, Mary's rejected suitor

**T**he day was not starting off so well, thought the Judge, whose innate political hypocrisy had propelled him to high office among the puritans. John Winthrop's *Model of Christianity*, written aboard the ship which carried him to the 1630 Puritan colony, had taught Acorn that his

judgment was in direct line with that of God, teaching as it did, that God established the Puritan community as a new Israel. Most of all, he agreed with the Winthrop principle that the high and low in society were created to be that way. That people "meane in subjection" were destined to remain in that condition. The mission of Acorn's life was to teach those in the middle to which end they belonged. He himself was second generation Puritan, born into a family that had prospered on their farms. They'd come from England sixty years ago, to discover no horses in New England. Thereupon the Acorns had shipped several horses from England and had mated them, using their colts for travel and sales. The horses were like jewels in the colonies, and the status of the Acorns rose immediately. Although horses were still scarce, Puritans feared that the Indians, whom they had driven out from their farmlands, might get hold of them. The Maine atrocities committed by the Indians against the settlers had earned them the reputation of red demons. Puritans believed that the devil was lurking just beyond the townships, waiting to get weak souls to sign his book and to give him entrance into the villages. Acorn had secretly sold a pair of horses to the Indians for a princely sum though he knew the Puritans would despise him if they ever found out. However, he relied upon continuing secrecy and his ability to manipulate gossip through the people who spread it.

The Indians, resisting settlement and assimilation into the civilization of the Europeans, were disgusted by the white man's hypocrisy, his supposed love for deity and his pretense of disdain for material wealth. Most of all, they hated his land grabs under the guise of treaties which were then promptly broken. When the Indians took revenge, they observed no boundaries; no aspect of slaughter was out of bounds. From a hiding place, Mercy Lewis had watched them dismember her father and scalp her mother before plunging a knife into her heart.

Acorn's stable boy, however, was becoming a problem. His father was a wild English immigrant who'd come to the colonies on the first horse-importing voyage. While his father had been useful for his ability to select the best horses for the long ocean journey, and had made a tidy fortune for himself, the son was a better groomer. But just last night, before the storm arrived, when his liquor wore off and Acorn had peered out the frosty window in search of elusive sleep, he'd noticed a lantern moving about in the stables. It was already 2 a.m. and the blackness of the night was unrelieved by any moonlight. Only the stars, fitfully visible through the restless clouds, had pinpointed the winter constellations. Yet there it was, a lantern moving through the stables from stall to stall.



Whatever was the boy up to? Was his crazy father back from roaming the woods again? The opal eyes of the immigrant had been the cause of rumors, as some, especially the mother of his son, a kitchen maid, claimed that he was demonic. And with his money, he could protect himself, buy off the judges who might have cause to restrain him. But Acorn, although unconvinced that God sent events to reward or to punish the Puritans, was certain of the birth order that determined men's fortunes. He was not really much of a believer. This stable boy, now, the problem was partly that Hathorne never paid for the commission he owed on the harness and saddles the boy sold for Acorn's business. The leather craftsman supplier would eventually get paid, but if the customers did not pay within three months, the harness salesman—in this case the groom—would forego his commission. Oh, Acorn knew it wasn't really fair to scavenge the interest on the loan from the leather craftsman, who was the middle man. But even if the groom lived on the pitiful commission, his room and board being his salary for the care of the horses, it was his destiny to be born into the servant class in the first place. And with a father like that one, always in trouble, and an unwed mother, what could he expect? Over in Salem, John Hathorne relied on Acorn to keep the longest possible loan ongoing. Ever since the disaster of the Indian campaign where many men died due to the failure to send reinforcements on time, there had been money problems. The interest on the loan was needed. Hathorne and Corwin had most likely caused the devastating losses of Fort Loyal and Falmouth, and thus most of northern Maine. They had mistakenly recommended the withdrawal of militiamen, without sending replacements, in May of 1690. That was two years after Stoughton had bungled the hostage exchange at Casco. No wonder Hathorne was late in his payments for the gear. Tell that to the stable boy, however, Acorn ruefully thought. The idea that the colonies were suffering due to God's punishments was a convenient distraction from the failures of their leaders, the same men who administered justice. And that Winthrop tract, with its emphasis on obedience to authority, came in handy too. Acorn approved of "The Modell for Christianity" as a subject for sermons in the meeting house. He'd mention it to the minister, Parris, to use again on Sunday. The thought of another cold day in the meeting house had sent him back to his bed.

Acorn might have been less sneaky had his wife been somewhat more powerful. But her will had been broken by their runaway son. Judge Acorn put the usual boundaries around that memory. He had learned to shut doors in his mind long ago, in order to prevent the paralysis of emotional weakness. As it was, he cultivated the impression of

virtue and helpfulness in the minds of his peers. Many, however, were beginning to recognize him for what he was: a self-serving, lazy hedonist. He had the secret vice of drinking overmuch. Every night his liquor still would be raided, so much so that he was sometimes forced to send his wife over to Salem to beg Mrs. Hathorne of her liquor provisions, the fruit of the Hathorne still. His wife had picked up his own ingratiating mannerisms, so that by the time she left Mrs. Hathorne, the latter would be thinking more about the gossip she'd learned than the increasing debt owed her by Mrs. Acorn. In addition, due to frequent hangovers and increasing heart trouble, Acorn sought to push off his own work upon the other judges. He would delegate work with the excuse that his travels were more important. In actuality, his love for travel equaled his love for drink. He would establish a need to go to a distant colony "to conduct business for the community" for several months at a time. When he was younger and leaner, Acorn had fathered a love-child, a little girl, on one of those journeys. Mistress Acorn did not trust her husband's fidelity, and she soon decided to go with him on his travels. Mrs. Acorn had learned to cultivate friendships among these distant folk, so that on their travels they rarely lacked a roof above their heads. While they were gone, the other judges had to do his work. He always managed to return just before their irritation had led them to secure another judge in his place.

But the day was not starting off so well, he thought again, as he passed the Estry home. He tightened his legs around the horse, who knew something was wrong by the muscle tension of his rider. The structure on Main Street was surrounded by a clearing centered with a majestic spruce tree. He recalled his pretense of helping Isaac Estry clear the land. Acorn would show up just as the men were pulling trees away to the forest edge, in preparation for log-splitting the next day. They would drop their axes to chat for a few minutes. Then he would observe that their hard work appeared to be completed. As he rode off, he would say, "Just let me know if you need any help." Isaac would think *that will be the day*. Mary had told Isaac of her own trouble with Acorn, that her rejection of his courtship preceded Isaac's own by only four months.

Acorn allowed himself to think back onto Mary's beauty, her intellect, and her sweetness in the short time when they'd become acquainted, back in the 1650s, these forty years ago. He had sought to win her hand, because she also was born in Great Yarmouth, Norfolk, England, where his own family had originated. Also, she was shy and seemingly malleable. He did not want a wife that he couldn't control. He was shocked and affronted when she turned down his proposal. He had tried to force him-



self upon her that very night, and she had pushed him far enough away to sock him in the jaw. Her strength so surprised him that he'd lost his balance and fallen backwards, crashing to the ground. That had given her the opportunity to run away. Mary wasted no time getting home. Her father and brothers might have wished her to take up the offer of marriage, but she was adamant. Thereafter the Acorns and the Estys were never really friendly again. Sometimes they would see and greet each other in Topsfield, but no longer with invitations to social events. Soon after that Acorn had found his wife, a pleasant enough looking brunette with aspirations to wealth and status that matched his own, a woman willing to obey him in his quest.

Now, as he rode into Topsfield square, he met a group of boys fighting. Mary Esty stood apart from them. She'd taken a boy by the collar, and she remonstrated with him.

"Now, son, you know you shouldn't provoke people with words or with injury. Your mother would be ashamed of you if she could see what you are doing behind her back."

"Mistress Esty," Judge Acorn called loudly as he moved closer. "Mistress Esty, you need some help from a magistrate here." He dismounted, and tethered his horse to a post. The unusual presence of a horse always helped him to assert authority; few enough were able to afford the steep price they fetched due to their scarcity.

"Judge Acorn, Jeremiah is instructed to leave other boys alone. He began the fight and the others joined him." Mary continued to hold the young boy's collar.

"Unhand him, Mistress Esty, remove yourself from this conflict. You have no right to discipline the child of another. See to it that you conduct yourself properly in the future," said Acorn angrily. Mary turned and rapidly walked away. She pursed her lips, recalling other occasions when Judge Acorn had publicly rebuked her. She knew him to be a lazy magistrate overfond of drink. She also knew that a man who harbored a grudge for so long was not one to reason with. Occasionally she would brood about his injustice to her, but prayer would help her to forget him.

Judge Acorn proceeded to enter the place of business, satisfied that he'd put Mary down the ladder where she belonged, with the meane and lowly. Women had to be made aware of their little worth. As he entered the room where the Judges met, he bumped into the cooper who'd won the town business, the year before, to make barrels for the wheat bought by the Topsfield magistrates for the troops. In a group, the Judges had gone out to each farm owned by the six coopers in Topsfield, to see which

of them would win the contract. The wheat had to be kept dry and safe from mold during the voyage up the coast, by ship, to Maine, and out to the frontier in the Berkshire Hills, by ox cart. The cooper who won the contract was inferior to Isaac Esty, and it was Acorn himself who'd swung the business away from Esty. In return, the cooper had delivered no less than five, strong, costly barrels to Acorn's own farm, not that he'd asked for them. It was a hidden return on the project. On the other hand, he didn't return them either, nor did he pay for them. He recalled that, during the bidding process, when the Judges had arrived at the Esty farm, they were impressed at the cleanliness and organization of the barn where Isaac worked. Mary herself gave them a tour of the outbuildings where the wood was stored, another where it was cut, and still another where it was treated. Isaac did the assembly himself in the barn, together with his apprentices. A certain chemical used in the treatment of the lathes was new to the process: it was to weather the outside wood sufficiently to repel termites and other critters. Acorn did not once speak to Mary during the tour, although she had smiled graciously at the group of men. Before they left the farm to go on to the next cooper on their list, the group stopped to address Mary, Isaac, and their sons Joshua and Jacob. It was at that time that Acorn made his move.

"Thank you, Mistress Esty, for the extensive tour of your property. Perhaps it was to divert us from the troubling location of your wood. You know it is against our procedure to use wood, for storing wheat, that has been cured near water." He pointed to the brook that ran behind the property, a good half mile from where the barns stood.

"That's the first I've heard of such a rule, said Isaac, knitting his brows. He noticed his wife's fists were clenched under her apron.

"Yes, well, you should have consulted with us awhile back to understand the new regulations," returned Acorn. The other judges looked at each other in bewilderment. They'd not heard of this regulation either.

"Somehow, Magistrate Acorn, everything troublesome seems to be linked to lands that hold water, these days," said Mary sharply. She raised her voice and shouted in his face. "Cattle need water, and wheat needs water to grow. I remind you everyone knows there is not a damp barrel in the lot, indeed that my husband's barrels are the best in Topsfield!"

She knew that Acorn was the man who'd given Salem Village the rights to the land that Topsfield had been promised first. In fact, Topsfield had already paid surveyors to draw up maps with Topsfield as the owners. Acorn had spear-headed the secret drive to sell the land to Salem Village also, in order to collect for it twice. This issue of both towns owning

the same land had spawned rivalry and ill feelings, as space was getting tight in the colony. The best land was near the river or near the coast, for the waterways served as transport for trade. The colonists otherwise had to resort to oxen drawing carts through the rocky and frozen forests. For his share of these ill gotten gains, Acorn's oldest son had been able to spend another year in special tutoring, and Mistress Acorn had purchased new tapestries for the drafty walls of their house.

"Some tongues should be held more closely," responded Acorn, shaking his head from side to side as he continued, still keeping his voice lowered, the more to provide contrast to her own. "Mercy Lewis has it that your bull sired the calf she wishes to sell, but that you cheated her of the documents proving lineage. It is just as wrong to cheat a poor girl of her earned money as it is to palm off damp wood for storing wheat." He smiled, saying all this in a tone with which he might render a compliment, while Isaac turned away angrily. He knew that if he got into an altercation with Acorn, anything he said would be twisted to mean the opposite. Mary saw her husband turn away to the barn.

"It is time for this meeting to end!" Acorn shouted over his shoulder as he strode away, the other judges trailing after him like crows with their heads bent, their tall black hats held behind them in both hands.

"Yes, just leave us!" Mary fairly yelled at his back. She knew he would persuade his cronies to forego the Esty barrels, not that they cared. Their business would do just as well without this contract. But it made her blood boil to see the influence of this craven judge, a worthless man if ever there was one. No wonder his son ran away, she thought. With a father like that, you'd never be able to trust anyone. The Acorn's younger son's disappearance had been quite the scandal for some time back. He too had been rejected by a girl, but unlike Mary, years before, who waited four months before agreeing to marry Isaac, this time the girl had chosen another fiancé within days. The couple had made fun of the boy's misery in public. After he vanished the fiancé had withdrawn his suit, and the girl was still single. So the revenge had been effective.

That evening, after the magistrates had followed Acorn's lead in the dismissal of the Esty application, he'd ridden to his home feeling more elated than in a long time. Maybe this would start the downturn of the Esty good fortune, he hoped. He just knew that Mary Esty was too good for her boots, and that her husband had fallen in social status when he married her. He thanked heaven that he'd not married her himself, that the Lord had prevented the match.

As usual, he recalled the many times he'd helped others to attain status and wealth through his strategies. Acorn was known to do favors for unlikely people, those he could use in the future. He thought of his protégé, the Spaniard who relied on his patronage. The man was supposed to become a tutor but could not live on the income offered him, so he relied on translations to sustain him. He translated for the southernmost colonies that had some dealings with the Spanish. The French, who were busy converting the Indians to their Catholicism and their politics, were another story. Anyone who spoke French would be suspect here, although that was not true in the northernmost colonies.

### Sister Sarah's Visit

Later that February of 1692, Mary's husband Isaac slaughtered the chicken. Jacob, surprising his mother, volunteered to pluck and dress it after plunging it into boiling water to loosen the feathers. Mary was pleased since she hated that part of the job. It seemed a desecration to pull out the plumage that had warmed the creature all winter. As she placed the cut chicken parts in the cooking pot, she took pieces of gristle outside to the wrens. Those birds were among the few hardy ones, besides the chickadees and juncos, to stay close beside her Topsfield, Massachusetts home all winter in the north. Mary looked upon them as company. The afternoon sun was low behind the tree line of the forest. Mary loved the oak-hickory forest beyond their cleared land and the brook running through it. She knew the tree types and their leaf shapes. The northern red oak leaves, that looked like human hands, had turned red brown. A few of the chestnut brown leaves blew out onto the snow bank. Next to them the bitternut hickory sheltered an eastern gray squirrel. Suddenly a wild turkey scooted out from the trees, followed the squirrel and chased it for the hickory nuts in its paws. The squirrel just made it up a shagbark hickory trunk before a bluejay circled above, sensing a nut about to fall into the snow. She looked up into the western sky and saw the pink clouds of the sunset divide and subdivide, making a pearly quilt for the bed of the firmament above. Mary turned to the house and saw her beloved husband Isaac placing candles in the front windows. She felt happy again, and looked forward to the visit with her sister Sarah. She remembered the extra jars of crabapple jelly she'd put up for Sarah to take home.

Around 4:20 pm the door began to bang and creak. Sister Sarah came alone, her nose red with the cold. The wind blew leaves along with

scent of spruce into the entry; the draft sparked new flares from the fire. The sisters hugged for a long and tender embrace, while the boys hung their heads. Mary helped remove the heavy shawl, snow scattered from the drifts, quickly shook it outside before hanging it up. Hannah helped her aunt Sarah take off her woolen cape and her bonnet, then her purple knitted neck-scarf and gloves. Mary had knit these for her last summer after dying the yarn herself with crushed berries. When she had finished hanging up all of her outer garments, she looked smaller by half. Mary led her to the fire. Sarah explained her husband's absence.

"Peter's gone up to Falmouth to see about his brother's family again," she said. Her brother-in-law, Thomas Cloyce, had been killed in Maine two winters ago.<sup>10</sup>

"Tell us the news, dearest Sarah!" Mary began.

"They say that Mercy Lewis is talking incessantly about the Indians, down in Salem Village. She's stirring up fear of the Wabanaki tribes again."

"I told you she was cracked," put in Jacob, as he looked up from his book. "Mother didn't believe me, but there's something wrong with that girl," he added. Joshua leaned over to punch his brother.

"You know you just like her," he put in. Jacob jumped up, turning around in one agile circle, landing on his feet to tower above Joshua. He shook his finger under the younger boy's nose. Before he could say anything, Sarah put up her hand.

"You may be right there, nephew," she said to Jacob, who looked triumphant. "Though she's related to me by marriage, we've never been close. In fact, I don't even know her aunt Susannah, my sister-in-law, very well because she's lived in Maine so long. But there's been talk about how strange Mercy's been acting lately."

"Nobody really knows what happened to her, when she was a little girl," said Isaac.

"Yes," Mary said slowly, moving her hands towards the fire. "Her whole family massacred by the Indians. Maybe she saw some of it. A terrible burden on a child's mind," she murmured.

"Whatever it is, she's a handful," reported Sarah. "Some say her nightmares are so bad the Putnams are hard pressed to keep her abed of a night."

"Serves them right," Mary claimed. "They've treated her pretty bad ever since she came to live with them. I know, for she told me, that they

never give her anything of her own. All her clothes hand-me-downs, all her food the last portion—you know, the turkey's neck, pieces that got no meat."

"You sound sympathetic, Mother," said Jacob wryly. "Seems you actually like the girl."

"I don't know if I like her or not," replied Mary, "but a young girl like that can't be expected to grow right if she's always made to feel like an outsider, and a charity case to boot. What's she got to look forward to?"

"Not much, with no money to bring to a marriage," said her sister, who knew what poverty was like. Her first marriage to Edmond Bridges had been financially difficult, and she'd seen her status in Salem slip, as they had to move when he went into debt. He'd had to sell their Topsfield home and land to open a waterfront tavern in Salem. Sarah pictured the icy waves crusting salt on the pilings that she could see from the windows. She smelled again the fresh salty wind off the Atlantic that scattered the close, sweaty air of the room where she served impatient men. She shivered to recall the damp draft on her cold feet coming under the threshold, whooshing around her when the door opened to admit customers. Those were hard years, made harder by Edmond's hot temper.

"My point, exactly," said Mary. "Come on now, you must be hungry. Joshua has set the table so's to be ready as soon as you got here. And Isaac chose a nice fat chicken for me to boil up. I baked bread just last night, and there's crabapple jelly to go with it, and a jar for you to take home. Can you stay another few nights? We'd love the company, Sarah." The sisters had become even closer after Joanna, their mother, had died. Their bond was partly made of shared past, both helping their mother to deal with their fierce tempered father, and partly proximity, for they lived closer to each other now, than either did to their older sister. Rebecca Nurse, the eldest Towne sister, was thirteen years Mary's senior and fifteen years older than Sarah. In many ways, she'd seemed more like a mother to them. The younger sisters had much in common except widowhood. When Sarah's husband Edmond died a decade earlier in Salem, she was left an impoverished widow with five children. She then married Peter Cloyce, whereupon the family moved closer to her sister Mary. A pond on Sarah's property ended in the brook that meandered through the forest at the edge of the Esy land. Both sisters watched the pond and brook mirror the seasons. Tonight, the twilight had turned the water turquoise as it reflected the azure sky, as it cleared of pink clouds just before sunset. The boulders in the brook were rimmed with snow. The sisters visited together as often as they could, for they had similar temperaments. Both enjoyed solitude in nature, the beauty of quiet snow mornings, or winter sunsets

<sup>10</sup> Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare: the Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692*. (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 74.

painted across the crimson horizon. Often Mary would wish that Joanna were still on this earth to see her daughters in middle age. She'd have been proud of them and of their faithful love for one another.

As they prepared the evening meal the sisters talked about their husbands. Mary pointed out that while Isaac was getting on in years, he still undertook the most challenging tasks in the cooper trade. Sarah described the difference between her deceased husband, Edmond, and Peter. She claimed, "It's like exchanging a hawk for a bluebird. Edmond often provoked other men despite his legal brilliance. He served some people as their attorney when he didn't really want to."

"Doubtless he had to do so, after he lost the ironworks to old Gould. That debt like to done him in," Mary recalled. "Edmond was a good man, sister. He couldn't help it if his frustrations over income often conquered his temper."

"Yes, but you'll never know how hard it was for me to serve the customers in our tavern," Sarah said sadly. "The wood was so dark and stained with smoke, I never could get it clean. Even the seagulls and sails on the horizon, that I could see from the wharf on the bright days, couldn't compensate for the rowdy men I had to serve late some afternoons." The winter twilight faded to darkness, its last rays through the kitchen window staining pink the flesh of the women. Sarah wiped her hands on a kitchen rag and moved closer to her sister so that she couldn't be overheard. "I never told you about what happened that Lord's day morning, after we opened and Charles Hill demanded to be served before we went to meeting.<sup>11</sup> Something happened that I never told anyone." Mary looked at her sister with a frown.

"What was it? I know Hill told the court he wouldn't go to hear our old minister Higginson because he was a Quaker and also because he oppressed the poor."

"Yes, he did say those things that morning. But we wanted no trouble from Hill so we served him his cake and ale. What I told no one, was that after Edmond went on ahead to meeting, Peter came into the tavern. He saw that I was upset, and at first he stayed only a short time, saying he didn't want to be late. But he waited outside on the wharf. After Hill had finally left, Peter came back into the tavern. I was looking out the window at the grey sea—remember this was November, and the wind was high that day—and the tears were streaming down my face. I had my fill of the

<sup>11</sup> Edmond and Sarah had testified in court that Hill demanded a pot of ale and cake and then defamed old Higginson. Persis McMillan, *Currents of Malice* (Peter E. Randall: Portsmouth, N.H. 1990), 76.

struggle and of Edmond's temper. Peter came up behind me, and when I turned to see who it was, he noticed my tears. He took my face between his two hands, Mary, and gave me such a look of tender love that it warmed my heart. They he patted my arms and left without saying a word. That look saved many a sour day thereafter," she said, turning back to the fireplace.

"It seems he was sent by the Lord to comfort you when you sore needed it," Mary remarked. She had often wondered about the speed with which Sarah had married Peter Cloyse after Edmond's death; how had the two come together? Nevertheless, Mary had also been relieved that Sarah and her children would be alright, because the remarriage had given her impoverished, widowed sister a home. Mary had begged Isaac to take her sister into their own home, but he'd said that she should go to Rebecca's house in Salem. The Nurse family was more prosperous. Again the difference in attitudes towards finances had driven a wedge between Mary and Isaac, one that healed only after Sarah married Peter Cloyse. As a result, Mary had a special fondness for Peter.

The sisters talked about food, the ever present subject, how to feed families through a long winter. Mary had saved some apples to make apple bread, did Sarah have any more yeast? The bread would only need a little sugar, some flour, and apples which she'd trade for the yeast. Did Sarah have any mature outer leaves of red cabbage for dye? They could get an early start in dyeing their spinning yarn. As far as food, they'd have to choose very simple recipes until the fishermen hauled their ox-carts in from Salem, several miles away directly on the Atlantic ocean coast, bringing fish for the Lenten dishes. Mary could almost taste a salmon mousse or a codfish chowder. But she could make a potato pie. She still had potatoes, milk from their cows, onions for seasoning and flour for the pastry. Mary liked to talk recipes with Sarah, for then she could discover what Sarah needed. Her younger sister was too sparse with her requests for help. Not that she was so very poor anymore, but she didn't try overmuch to stock her larder as in previous years, prior to financial failure, when her children were young. Sometimes it annoyed Mary that Sarah thought so little about her own health. As the sisters embraced before bed, Sarah across the hall in the opposite corner of the boys' room next to Hannah's bed, Mary made her promise to stay until after the Sunday meeting two days hence. She straightened the curtain that separated the women's beds from the boys, and on impulse turned back to kiss Sarah's cheek again.

"It's so good to have you here under our roof," she said with a loving smile. She smoothed the hair from Sarah's cheek. "You're still such a pretty girl," Mary murmured to her little sister.



## The Sabbath Meeting

The Sabbath morn dawned freezing cold and grey. Mary laid out Isaac's heaviest breeches, belt, wool jacket, the collar, hat, and dress leather shoes with buckles. She'd also warmed his long underwear by the bedroom fireplace. She inspected the thick woolen sweater, the color of burnt orange, that she'd knit for him. She'd saved onion skins for months and then boiled them to produce the dye. All these garments would not keep him warm during the long day. The Puritans would have to sit through the morning sermon, then break for lunch at the Noon House, and spend another long afternoon at the meetinghouse.

For herself she selected the grey woolen outfit, its jacket fitted at the waist, that fell to mid hip over the long pleated skirt. Lately she'd lined the jacket and the skirt again, with beautiful yellow cotton dyed from *roseda luteola*, or weld, a biennial plant. The old lining tended to slip and bunch up under her limbs. She put on two cotton shirts, two petticoats, her longest woolen stockings, and her cap that snugly fitted her head. *The only good thing about this freezing day is that Sarah will come home to stay with us again tonight.* Mary was so fond of her sister. She could trust her completely, and absolute trust was almost unknown in Puritan relationships. She took a moment to kneel by the freshly made bed, contemplating the gentle peace of the quiet morning that was undisturbed by any sounds of human labor. Only the low voices of Sarah and Hannah were audible as they dressed in the opposite bedroom while the boys still dozed. *Please, dear Lord, keep Joshua from fighting with that terrible John Fuller. If John teases him again Joshua may punch him in front of the whole meeting.* Joshua hated the bully, John Fuller, who stood six inches taller, and lorded his strength over all the preteen Puritan boys. The children tended to disrupt the service with their punching and whispering. The noisemakers were ordered outside where they had to sit on benches in the frigid winter air without even the shelter of the cold meetinghouse walls and roof.

The 6:30 am walk to the meetinghouse took place in the dark, after they'd eaten their beef stew and bread which Mary served by candlelight. Mary had stored the stew in the barrel outside their home, bringing it in to thaw just before bedtime the night before. Isaac was unusually quiet. Something was on his mind, Mary thought. Something he won't share with Sarah and the boys.

The stars were unusually bright in the pre-dawn sky and the crystal air invigorated the lungs. Mary inhaled deeply and felt the icy particles sting her nose and throat. She prayed that the sermon would be inspiring

and calm the tensions building among her neighbors. The Puritan women were often dragged into the men's feuds over land boundaries. That awful Mary Gould Reddington had started up the gossip again about poor Sarah Wild, that she was a witch.<sup>12</sup> The stories first circulated in 1688, but the trouble began, Mary thought, almost thirty years earlier in the hatred that overtook Mary Gould and her brother after their sister Priscilla Gould Wild had died. John Gould had soon remarried, to the beautiful Sarah Averill. That marriage had fuelled the boundary dispute between Salem and Topsfield.

The group passed the wolves' heads nailed by the side of the door and under the meetinghouse windows. Blood from the severed wolf necks had frozen to the side of the outer wall. Bears were not so displayed although they were even more dangerous to individuals and livestock in the colony than the wolves. In 1664 a law was passed stating that the reward for killing a wolf could only be collected if the head were nailed to the meetinghouse. The colonies of Salem and Ipswich had been paying 15 shillings for a live wolf and 10 for a dead one since 1640.

Beside the pulpit sat a desk, and on the desk resided an hourglass bound in brass. It alone marked the passage of time for the parishioners and pastor. Sometimes Mary thought that the minister paid no attention to it at all; indeed her frozen toes, expecting release by the onrush of blood when she could stand up for the noon break, were told no, the time had not yet come, as the sermon went on and on in the frosty air. When the sun came up it made little difference inside the meetinghouse, not only because of the cloudy grey weather, but also because of the shade offered by the spruce, cedar and elms growing outside the windows. Sometimes Mary would strain to hear the birdcalls within the tree branches that reminded her there was life ongoing outside the tomblike atmosphere within. Nonetheless, occasionally there would be a major break in the service, as for instance when Quaker men shouted in through the windows, "Woe, woe to the people," and "The Lord will destroy thee!" Once a Quaker woman had screamed at the minister, "Parson, sit down! Thee has already said more than thou knows how to say well."<sup>13</sup>

The sermon dwelled upon the new and unwanted emphasis, in the colony, of commercial greed. It was preached by the minister, Reverend

<sup>12</sup> McMillan, 91.

<sup>13</sup> Alice Morse Earle writes that these interruptions were due to the frightful persecution of the Quakers. She continues, "These poor Quakers were arrested, fined, robbed, stripped naked, imprisoned, laid neck and heels, chained to logs of wood, branded, maimed, whipped, pilloried, caged, set in the stocks, exiled, sold into slavery and hanged by our stern and cruel ancestors." *The Sabbath in Puritan New England*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Charles Scribners, 1892), 231-2.



Joseph Capen, a man Mary believed to have been a friend of John Allin, the honored minister from Dedham, who'd died twenty years earlier. Mary liked Reverend Capen, because he took the time to talk with her, and he often informed her of those in the community who were ill, so that she could take food to them. She knew he understood her deep devotion to God, and her desire to glorify Him. As she took her seat in the meetinghouse Mary's mind wandered back upon what she'd heard from her relatives over in Clapboard Trees,<sup>14</sup> a section of Dedham, about John Allin. They'd discussed his attempts to get a new covenant in his own community church of Dedham, one of the earliest and most conservative in its resistance to change. Allin knew the effect of the old covenant of the Puritan utopia, which had, in addition to stringent requirements, demanded of each candidate for membership, a public presentation of an inner experience of grace. She remembered overhearing these discussions long ago, at the rare family reunion. She could almost hear her father saying that Allin agreed with a new covenant, one that accepted simple understanding, belief in, and obedience to God's word as revealed in the Bible. This would omit the requirement of public testimony to a private experience of grace, articulated in public to the satisfaction of the judges and church members. Many qualified ministers had declined employment in Dedham because the village resisted the new covenant. Dedham had refused to change until 1672, a year after representatives of all towns in the General Court of the Company of Massachusetts Bay had overwhelmingly voted for it. Puritans there had excluded those whose public presentation of their inner experience of grace was not accepted, and they had also refused baptism to infants born in the colony of non-members. Those belonging to the community were therefore shrinking in population. The new covenant would guarantee membership to the second and third generations and circumvent the church's dying out.<sup>15</sup>

Mary was reflecting on the Parable of the Ten Minas that she came across in her own prayer worship that week. She had sometimes used it in her teaching the children. She hoped the minister would preach on the message hidden in the parable against building up worldly wealth. Jesus knew that the people of Jerusalem expected a glorious New Kingdom on Earth with material wealth. However, his new kingdom of the spirit

<sup>14</sup> Clapboard Trees would later become incorporated as the town of Westwood, Massachusetts, in 1897.

<sup>15</sup> See the discussion of the initial community of saints in Dedham, in Kenneth A. Lockridge's *A New England Town: The First Hundred Years*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985, 1970), 34.

would require giving up goods in favor of spiritual riches. At least, she thought, that was how she would make sense of the parable, which seemed otherwise cruel.

Meanwhile, in the foyer of the meetinghouse, the men were gathering and talking, as usual, about income. Mary knew, because she often heard it, the jealousy of the poor Topsfield farmers of Salem's prosperity. Everyone knew that the port city provided opportunity to make wealth. Salem was situated on the coast in a beautiful area where whaling, trading ships, all the sailing merchandise needed on those ships, were plentiful. Her older sister, Rebecca Nurse, had married into a prominent Salem family. Mary had heard Topsfield Puritans criticize the wealth of Salem's commercial elite. An especially strong attack called them endangered because their commercial pursuits obscured the piety and singleness of purpose demanded by God. Mary did not think this discussion, with its focus, would help the unity, peace and love supposedly sought by all Puritans; indeed, the underline placed upon the Salem upper class, if she so dared to call it, would do just the opposite. She looked over at Isaac and saw his frown. She knew they'd discuss the men's talk later, in private, where no listening ears could carry tales of their forbidden criticism. She would have to ask Isaac if he knew whether the farmers in Topsfield had any associations with Samuel Parris, the minister at Salem Village who owned Tituba. Parris had inflamed the Salem merchants with his unacceptable pulpit message.

At the noon break, Mary noticed a basket carried by Constance, the daughter of her friend. It was made of native long bramble, honeysuckle and clematis twigs, gathered after the sap had gone down in November. Constance was very neat in her weaving of the twigs, Mary noted. But before she could compliment her, she heard some women exclaiming about the spectacle created by Abigail Williams, who had fallen ill.<sup>16</sup>

"She was bitten and pinched by a spectral spirit," said one.

"She choked and twisted something," said another.

"And now her cousin Betty is also afflicted," put in a third.

The horror was gathering momentum.

Mary felt a chill down her neck, though the Noon House was much warmer than the icy cold meetinghouse. Inside the Noon House, woolen wrapping blankets gave off a steamy fragrance as they were removed from the food brought by the women for the noon meal.

"When did this start?" she asked.

<sup>16</sup> Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York: Vintage, 2003), 18.

"Just a day or two ago," was the answer. At that moment, Joey, Mary's three year old grandson by her son Joseph<sup>17</sup> pulled at her skirts.

"Mother Mary," said her daughter-in-law Jane, "Can you watch him for a few minutes? I've got to go home to look in on baby Jacob, who is at home with his daddy. Your son wouldn't leave him, as he is such a good father. Jacob has the croup. You know he was spared last winter, but it's starting to go round again." The young mother looked worried.

"Of course I will, Jane. But, let me come with you. My sister Sarah is here and she can go home with Hannah, Isaac and the boys. I'd rather take turns carrying Joey, who looks none too good either. Don't think he should stay all afternoon in the cold meetinghouse. Let's go tell Isaac." The women went outside to where the men were unloading more lunch foodstuffs brought by the parishioners. Isaac looked grave when he heard about his grandson's croup.

"You women go along: don't forget to make some hot broth for yourselves. Wouldn't do for you all to get sick, now." Mary thanked him with her eyes. She could always rely on him thinking first about her own welfare.

"Sarah is visiting with some other neighbors: could you tell her to corral the boys and come home with you? Tell her as well that Jane is concerned about baby Jacob and must leave now with me, and I'll take turns carrying Joey. He doesn't look like he can walk the distance on his own two feet."

### Return of the Rapist

Two mornings later, after she'd packed her sister Sarah off and prepared some aramantha leaves for a syrup to calm baby Jacob's cough, Mary was out in her front yard, scattering sand over the ice. Sarah Good had come by to bring her some pumpkins. The poor, homeless woman, Sarah Good, had been living off the charity of the Topsfield and Salem women. After she had greeted Mary this freezing cold morning, Sarah Good bent over to pick up a stray branch, and as she was straightening up, a hand reached out to grasp her arm. She turned round to stare into the wild opal blue eyes of her rapist.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Esrey was born May 2, 1657 in Topsfield, Mass. His wife, Jane Steward, was born in Ipswich, Mass. in 1654. Joseph, Mary and Isaac's son, died in Canton, Mass. on October 25, 1738.

"I've made inquiries about you," he said with a leer, "and I wanted you to know that I have faced my shortcomings and want to make amends. Can't we be friends?" Sarah stood stunned, and Mary overheard the words. She realized who the man was from his opal eyes, because she'd never forgotten Sarah's description of them. Mary felt her heart stop and breath came haltingly into her lungs. Sarah staggered, and caught herself against a tree. Immediately Mary put her arms around Sarah and began to pray for God's presence and guidance. She felt the Holy Spirit envelop her in a soft mist around her head. She closed her eyes and breathed slowly and deeply. When she opened her eyes, he was still there. She saw a man, carrying a cane, wearing expensive black clothing and the best British leather boots.

"Know that I forgave you long ago," Sarah said clearly.

"But I want to make amends, I want to be friends. You know your duty as a Puritan woman," he went on.

"I know that forgiveness came hard, but you have mine," Sarah said strongly. "Know also that we can never be friends. You can best make amends by respecting my wishes now: do not contact me again. Leave me in peace," she ordered. The man gave her a piercing look, then turned towards Topsfield village. He walked slowly, shaking his head. As he ambled along, he had a vision of a large structure built in a semi circle, populated by insects in cells beside and atop one another. Within the semi-circle, a smaller structure housed a human-like guardian figure that sat alone. Suddenly an axe flew through its room and landed on its head, splitting the skull in twain. The brains spilled out as the pieces of the skull fell away, and a geyser of blood spurted up like a fountain. He smiled to himself as he pondered this vision and its improvement upon the Indian practice of scalping.

Hannah came out of the house while pulling her shawl around her shoulders.

"Mother, who was that? I saw him grab hold of Sarah's arm. What ever did that scary man want with you?" Hannah's clear eyes were troubled, especially since her mother seemed so preoccupied.

"That was a stranger, Hannah. Someone gave him wrong directions—either that, or he got them confused." Hannah nodded, her frown deepening.

The women watched him until he'd turned the corner. Mary recognized the feelings of fear, confusion, chaos and discomfort he'd left in his wake. *Please, dear God, did Sarah do right just now? Does she have to have a relationship with him, since she can neither welcome him nor trust*

him? *How could she be friends with such a man?* As she put her arm around Hannah and Sarah, Mary felt rather than heard encouragement from her Maker. They slowly walked up the path to the house. She knew that forgiveness was enough. She trusted God, she loved and praised Him. As soon as she began inwardly to express her praise, the presence of God, enthroned in the praise of his people, flowed to calm and soothe her. She brought Sarah into her kitchen, fixed her some hot broth, and spoke aloud her faith that she was in the right. Sarah, who had burst into tears as soon as she sat down, thanked Mary and Hannah for their care.

All day Mary reconnected to God's presence, which protected and warmed her. When she took the aramantia syrup to her grandson, her daughter-in-law commented on how well she looked. She kept wondering how, back in the immediate aftermath, she had not feared the return of the rapist to the Topsfield area. Had she remembered it, she might never have overcome her fear. *You were working with me, dearest Lord, to keep me from fearing his return. But now that he's found poor Sarah, what does it mean?* She knew that Sarah would have to be on her guard; it was a warning of some kind.

The evil force was in Topsfield; there was no doubt.

### Mary Visits Rebecca Nurse

The next day, Hannah and Mary bundled up warmly and got into the back of the oxcart. Joshua and Isaac sat in the front and prepared to drive the oxcart into Salem Village. The gray skies were bitter cold and the muddy roads were frozen. The hours they'd be in the cart would be shortened, they hoped, by the fact that they couldn't get stuck in mud, because the roads were so cold. Oxen were harder to manage than horses, but the Estys saved their horse for their own riding. Isaac wondered how the new harnesses he'd acquired would help the animals. Joshua volunteered to walk and to guide them with reins to increase their security. As they left their farm, Hannah pointed up at the canopy of beech trees. The smaller sugar maples seemed to take refuge beneath them. This time of year their skeletal arms appeared to mingle overhead. The women noticed the many beech leaves that had remained all winter on the boughs; the colorful maple leaves, now brown, skirted their trunks. Mary saw a black capped chickadee on the branch overhead. The bird took off just as the cart passed underneath, frosting the air with its *chicka-dee-dee-dee*.

They bumped along the dirt roads and carefully protected the pies they'd made for Rebecca. Suddenly the cart tipped as it hit a rock ledge hidden by leaves. The women succeeded in keeping the pies upright. Isaac and Joshua were disheartened to see the wheel had come off: the oxen were stamping their feet in frustration.

"You, Joshua, unhitch the animals and walk them up onto the forest floor. You, Mary and Hannah, build a fire in the road with the stalks from yon burdock thickets," he said, pointing to the hedgerows at the edge of the forest, "to warn anyone coming along to slow down and move around us, not that that will be easy!"

Mary and Hannah quickly gathered the stalks of the burdock plants and stuck them up in the road. Their burrs were piled around the stalks, together with small burdock branches, and the stems caught quickly. The women gratefully sheltered the flames with their capes until they blazed freely. When they were warmed up, Mary decided to gather some of the plants to take home, for dried and broken burdock leaves make a tea that could serve as a laxative or to stem off an oncoming cold. Had it been summer, they'd have gathered the leaves to use as antidotes to poison ivy and poison sumac.

"Mary, relieve Joshua with the oxen now; I need him to help me with the wheel," Isaac ordered. Mary nimbly jumped onto the forest floor and spoke soothingly to the animals. They were disturbed by this change in routine. While they worked carefully, plodding along, pulling carts and plows, oxen were not happy standing under trees unless it rained or snowed. These animals were old friends of the family, having grown up with the children. Joshua lifted the cart while his father replaced the wheel.

Soon the oxen were hitched up again and they resumed their journey. Crows spun out of the dogwood shrub, crying *caw caw caw* as they flew. Hannah frowned at these birds as they fled. *Not a good omen*, she thought to herself. Her spirits brightened as they passed through a pine forest, the pines more plentiful near the coast. A red-tailed hawk soared above the hemlock grove ahead, his tail spread wide. She spotted a white-tail deer bounding away, the female following the antlers of the male into the forest. Mary hugged her daughter and smiled.

"We'll be there soon, my darling," she whispered, "barring more accidents!" And shortly they noticed the wider road leading into Salem Village, where Francis Nurse was a prominent yeoman. Mary's elder sister was old enough to be her mother; she was more fragile now, at age seventy, that her hearing was failing. The women climbed the hill to the

Nurse home leading the oxen and cart between them. Isaac hitched up the oxen and sent Joshua to get water for them. Mary and Hannah pushed open the heavy door and stepped into the front room, taking care not to bump their heads on the low ceiling.<sup>18</sup>

As they entered, Rebecca slowly stood up from her chair at the spinning wheel and embraced them.

"Here, darlings, sit by the fire and get warm. Let me get you a hot rum drink." Salem made most of its money from trading; rice, rum and manufactured goods were now more plentiful because of the growing merchant class which shipped them into the port.

"Good, dear sister, we just finished eating before we left Topsfield, but its been awhile out there in the cold," said Mary. Hannah looked approvingly around at the room. How her aunt Rebecca managed to keep it neat and cozy, given her arthritis which flared in the cold weather each winter, amazed her. Hannah looked at her own mother and gave thanks that Mary's energy and health were as yet untouched by age.

"Which service did you attend, Rebecca?" asked Mary. The wife of Francis Nurse went to church at both meetinghouses in Salem Town and Salem Village. But Rebecca did not hear the question. Carefully she set down the hot mugs and covered her feet with a blanket.

"There is news: Reverend Parris' salary will still be delayed, though the Essex Court ruled on January 17<sup>th</sup> that the committee should pay it," she announced. Parris, who had determined to be a merchant before he went into the ministry, needed the salary to pay off his creditors, from whom he'd borrowed heavily for his merchant trade. He still owned property in Barbados and in Boston; like many another Salem Villager, his holdings were diversified. Some farmed and ran taverns, shipping their winter fruits and vegetables, apples and squash, corn and grains to the Caribbean, others were fish jobbers who traded in dried fish; all knew that more than one business was best. In particular, no one expected a minister to live on his salary.<sup>19</sup>

"There's something wrong with that man," Hannah observed. "He keeps showing his hand: he doesn't like anyone who won't agree with him. Not like the other preachers who at least tried, on the surface, to be fair to those who opposed them."

<sup>18</sup> The Nurse home is described by Frances Hill, in *Delusion of Satan: the full Story of the Salem Witch Trials* (Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo Press, 2002), p. 88.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Charles Hoffer, *The Devil's Disciples* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 23.

And it's too bad that the Putnams forced him onto all of Salem Village despite the fact that many disagree with the Putnams and Ingersolls."

"Yes," said Rebecca, mother of Samuel Nurse, a man who was already openly opposed to Parris, "It would have been better for Salem Village had Parris never come here. But you know I speak openly to you both only because I truly trust you." Mary hugged her sister. "There is other news: Paris' daughter Betty, and Abigail Williams, have been twisting and choking, twisting and turning, with bites and beaten limbs. They say they're attacked." Hannah felt her blood run cold; she looked at her mother anxiously.

"There, there, I'm sure there is some explanation: maybe they've convulsions?" soothed Mary. She turned the talk to sickness in Topsfield and told her sister about her grandson's croup. Later, she helped Rebecca to fold her laundry. Next, they draped over the table the sheets still frozen from the line. Mary's mind went back to Mary Dyer, the Quaker woman executed for returning to Boston in protest of an unjust law: the exclusion of persons who dissented from the theology in power. She certainly had courage to face evil and not be overcome by it. Mary thought about the meaning of her own name; she felt unworthy to bear the name of the Mother of God. How would it have been, at such a young age, to hear that one would bear a child by the Holy Spirit? That would take courage and submission to God. Mary Dyer, too, had her name. She spoke of living in Paradise the five days before her death. The Quaker woman had walked to her hanging, transfigured, undisturbed by the drumming to prevent her from communicating with the crowds. Nonetheless, she had managed to convey that crucial message: that God had been with her, had made her last moments on earth a Paradise. What a testimony, she thought, as she lifted the dry sheets from the table.

"I've been sleeping poorly," Rebecca confessed to her sister. "I seem to have a feeling of dread: it wakens me in the night."

"Dearest sister," Mary answered, "when that happens to me I pray the Lord comfort me, and protect me from the terrors of the night, as the Psalmist pleads." She hugged her sister. "I also get up, light a candle, and read the Psalms. That always calms and soothes me," she went on. "You are the strong one, named for Rebekah, mother of Jacob and Esau, the founders of the Covenanted Race, the Israelites favored by God," she continued.

"I do wish our mother, Joanna, were still on this earth," replied Rebecca. "She too had the faith, like you do, Mary," the old woman smiled at Mary.



"We will join her in afterlife, in heaven, when it is our time to go," murmured Mary, as the two carried the clothing basket up the narrow, dark stairs. They began to mount the steps, Mary going backwards, the heavy basket between them. With her right hand, Rebecca clung to the walls for support, as she held the basket in her left hand.

"Let me do that for you," protested Hannah, reaching up for the old woman. Mary carefully walked back down the steps as the basket was placed on the floor. Rebecca tottered to her seat. After Hannah returned, Mary helped Rebecca up the stairs. Without speaking of it, both women thought of the time their mother, Joanna Towne, earned her reputation for witchcraft when she supported the minister Gilbert against the Goulds. That group had wanted him cast out for drunkenness.<sup>20</sup> Their mother, Joanna, knew that the man's distemper, not drunkenness, was responsible for his dizzy spells and stumbling speech. Joanna had refused to buckle under the pressure of power forcing injustice. She spoke out in court for Gilbert despite the fact that her daughter-in-law, Phoebe Gould Towne, had to deal with her own mother, Phoebe Gould, who insisted upon opposing Gilbert. The two old women were stubborn in their positions. Joanna kept her dignity in her own home, which she shared with Phoebe and her son Joseph, two years after her husband had died leaving most of his land and home to Joseph. The situation was uncomfortable: Joseph was a peacemaker and forbade his wife to discuss it.<sup>21</sup> Phoebe appreciated the generosity of the Townes and actually liked her mother-in-law, but her own mother would not back down. Phoebe knew that her mother's willingness to put her, Phoebe, in position midway between them, meant that her own mother placed herself above that of her daughter. After all, it took no great intelligence to figure out the tensions this would raise. Both women knew that gossip surrounding a woman as a witch would contaminate her children as well. Witches spawned witch children. Best to keep quiet on this subject, thought Mary. No need to upset ourselves.

"Is there anything in particular that's bothering you?"

"I keep thinking back to the Holtons, the angry people and their nasty pigs," replied Rebecca. "When I asked them politely to keep the pigs out of our garden, they did nothing. Indeed, I saw them removing fence posts and storing them in their barn. Of course, I thought they were mending the fence between our properties, but no, they were actually tearing down the boundaries! No wonder Francis was beside himself when he

<sup>20</sup> McMillen, 65-66.

<sup>21</sup> McMillen, 66.

came into the kitchen that morning. The pigs had eaten all the new cabbage that Francis was trying to grow. You know, that hybrid we'd been given, that he tried to grow? The pigs had destroyed everything; there was no way to start again. When I saw my husband's hands shaking, even the flesh on his face trembling, I thought he might have a stroke. So, you recall I told you what happened!"

"Yes, you rushed out to the garden and roused the pigs."

"I screamed at them. And the Holtons were near the bottom of the hill, and they came running up when I took up the poker. I was swinging it at the pigs and truly didn't care if I hit them, but I know for a fact the swine jumped back and charged down the hill."

"And the Holtons had the nerve to remonstrate with you?"

"Yes, that's what's even more disturbing. They yelled they would bring suit against me for damaging their pigs!! Can you imagine!! When their livestock had just eaten all our produce, with their permission like, when they removed the fence!!"

"No wonder you let them have a piece of your mind."

"In no uncertain terms, Mary! But it keeps coming back to me."<sup>22</sup>

"That's because they never apologized and blamed you for their fault in the matter," said Mary softly. "We Towne women have never been able to bear injustice in silence."

"No, and we got that from both our parents," said Rebecca. The women had begun to place the clothing on the beds. "Mother's temper didn't blaze like Father, because she kept it under control. She could see its damage by the way he acted when he was angry."

"There's something else on my mind, too, Mary, and that's old Minister Higginson. He opposed sister Sarah's first husband Edmond, you recall, and he was the one slandered in the tavern that Sarah and Edmond kept on the Salem Wharf. Remember, the customer—what was his name—said he wouldn't go to hear Higginson preach because he oppressed the poor? Well, Higginson blamed Edmond and Sarah for that incident, due to their unlicensed tavern serving the man beer on meeting day morning."

"How do you know he blamed Sarah and Edmond?"

"He spoke of it recently to Francis, my dear husband, when they were both at market. He said that none of us Nurses or Townes had rights to put on airs."<sup>23</sup> The fact of our own poor roots—by that he meant we

<sup>22</sup> Rebecca's anger at the Holtons is mentioned in Carol F. Karsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York: Norton, 1998), 129.

<sup>23</sup> McMillen, 112.

weren't rich when we got here—and on account of the gossip we allowed about ministers. Can you imagine!! As if any families were free of the talk of ministers: what else is there to talk about, when Salem Village is tied to Salem Town through taxes and rates, and we can't ever get our own parish going here?" Rebecca sat down suddenly on the bed. Mary could see how upset the older woman was, and Mary took her gnarled hand within her own supple fingers.

"Dearest sister, you are truly upset, I can see that. But remember, God is in charge. Higginson is wrong. I was reading this very week from Winthrop's *Modell of Christianity*, where he enjoins us to take care of one another. It's true that old Higginson is against charity to the poor and he breaks God's laws, not to mention our own duty. I have it right here in my head, plain as day. Hear what Winthrop says: "We must bear one another's burdens... We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities for the supply of others' necessities... We must delight in each other, make others' conditions our own; rejoice together, labor and suffer together."<sup>24</sup> What does that mean, Rebecca, but to take care of our poor? Remember how Sarah was forced out when Edmond died? Why, if she hadn't married again so soon, no telling what would have happened... Higginson is just plain wrong!" Mary had raised her voice and struck her hand down upon the quilt.

Rebecca burst out laughing.

"It does me good to see you expound upon charity, dearest Mary; few have the soft heart you do. No wonder you could recall, word for word, Winthrop's text that he wrote aboard that ship, what was its name?"

"The Arabella," said Mary, smiling now.

"Well, old Higginson is just plain meane," said Rebecca, as she stood up and put her arms around Mary.

#### *Afflictions of the Children*

Several weeks later, with Isaac in a bad mood, her sons arguing and Hannah depressed, Mary began to feel the weight of the negative interpretations and the danger in the air. *What can I do, dearest Lord, to keep up my spirits when the evil around me is so palpable?* Mary opened her Bible to Psalm 37, and thence to her favorite words, "Take delight in the Lord, and He will bring you the desires of your heart." She closed her eyes, sitting down upon her bed, and meditated upon the Holy Spirit. She always had a sense of gentleness in its presence; and while it had no gender as such, if anything the sweet presence seemed feminine in nature. She could feel the air she breathed becoming warmer, and scented as it were,

<sup>24</sup> John Winthrop, "Modell of Christianity," reprinted in *Ideals: Thanksgiving* (vol. 62 no. 5, 2005), 38-9.

with roses. This happened after her meditation upon the Holy Spirit. The scent of roses signified the presence of Mary. The Virgin placed her small, pure hands around the heart of this worshipper, and the Puritan woman named for her, felt the tension ease from her neck and shoulders as she rested. *Dear God, I love you so, but I fell as if I am ineffectual in glorifying you. My family is upset, and they look to me for perfection. They blame me for their discomforts.* This unspoken question brought its quick answer, as always, that she should pray. As Mary began to pray for each family member, she found the peace she sought.

Hannah, who'd brought potatoes in from the root cellar, came flying up the stairs and into the room. She breathlessly cried out news about the family of minister Parris.

"Betty Parris is ailing! She has fits of weeping, cannot concentrate, and sits in a trance! Her cousin Abigail Williams has taken to barking like a dog on all fours!"<sup>25</sup>

Mary caught hold of the bedpost. Her sense of evil had not come from her own distress; it was real.

"What does the doctor say?"

"He doesn't know what to think; he's tried cures but the girls don't get any better. They seem to get worse!"

Mary composed herself quickly and sought to reassure her daughter. "Hannah, I think the best thing to do is to surround ourselves with the Holy Spirit. That way, we can keep our minds clear and our hearts pure. We dare not add to this confusion: that would be the worst thing to do. I pray that Betty and Abigail will recover soon: let the Holy Spirit hover over them, and let them meet Godly people today."

Hannah looked at her mother in some doubt. She knew there would be more to come. The fact that Salem Village was frozen in February ice, that there was nothing to do, that the young people met in groups only on the Sabbath during this time of year, left them little to talk about. The winters were so long, the demands of life so frightening, and the concentration upon death and punishment so everlasting, that she couldn't be blamed for seizing upon this news as a welcome distraction. She decided not to tell her mother that Topsfield had caught the excitement from Salem Village in a fever of interest.

In bed that evening, after their lovemaking, Isaac told Mary that he was certain something in the frontier wars against the Wabanaki tribes was driving the magistrates to look for a way to distract the settlers.

<sup>25</sup> Marion L. Starkey, *The Devil in Massachusetts* (New York: Random House Anchor Books, 1989), 39-40.

"Ever since Governor Andros was overthrown in 1689, we've been without a Royal Charter. When you add to that the defeats on the frontiers, you know the magistrates are nervous about their status. They are supposed to keep things under control. They're doing a bad job of it," Isaac reflected.

"They're not the only nervous ones," Mary said quietly. She placed her hand on her husband's chest. She liked to feel his heart beat beneath her fingers. "The women are afraid that we could lose the titles to our lands, without the legal foundation of the royal Charter. Some of our mothers and fathers left England to escape servitude. Now they face that again, if they lose their lands." Isaac put his large hand over her smaller one. His palm, calloused from many years of handling rough barrel planks, scratched her delicate skin.

"What's this I hear about Betty Parris and Abigail Williams? The men are saying that Griggs tried all kinds of concoctions to cure them, but nothing worked." Mary took his large hand off hers and placed it on the quilt between them. She sat up on her side, on her elbow, holding her cheek as she looked down in the dark bedroom to her husband's gleaming eyes.

"Hannah came home in a tizzy," she said that Griggs is claiming that the Evil One is afflicting Betty and Abigail."

"That'll be the day! In truth, if the enemy wanted to attack someone here, right inside the colony, it wouldn't be those girls. Griggs just can't find a cause, he doesn't know what's going on. So he chalks it up to the Devil. Griggs is starting a battle that will soon get out of hand, Mary. You know how these people are. Soon they'll be looking for accomplices for the Enemy. You know where that leads."

Both of them contemplated the hanging of supposed witches, like Glover. It had happened before.

"Well, it does seem as though the excitement has got people preoccupied," pondered Mary. She laid her head back down on the pillow.

"And that's just what the magistrates and generals want: some of them are the same people, Mary. You know what I think? The distraction has arrived: something to take the minds of the people off of the military defeats on the northeastern frontier, the Second Indian War.<sup>26</sup> You know the men already blame the moral condition of the colony for these defeats. They're saying that God is showing his displeasure with us by allowing these defeats. So now, if those in control can blame the presence of the

Enemy in the war, surely they can blame the Enemy in our midst for these afflictions."

"Isaac, God is always in control even when He doesn't appear to be."

"Mary, you are right, but it's hard to see the hand of God when the pulpits force us to see the Devil everywhere we look."

"My dearest husband, on that point we have always agreed. If we look for the good, we will find it. Likewise, if we look for the bad, we will find that too. I meant to tell you something funny that happened, that Rebecca heard about. It seems that a minister's wife was trying to impress the women of the meetinghouse where her husband was interviewing for the job of the chief pastor. After his sermon, she was standing at his side, shaking hands with the parish. She backed up too close to a broomstick that was leaning against the wall behind the door frame. Her foot stepped on the broom part, and the handle got caught under her cap. *Am!* off the cap flew. And guess what! She had false curls attached to the cap, and she was bald!" Isaac laughed, kissed her, and turned over. Mary fell asleep smiling.

Isaac came into the home the next morning with his hands bleeding. He'd been driving the cart pulled by oxen along Salem Street to Salem Village that frozen morning. A Salem man on a horse refused to let him pass, instead racing his animal past the stymied oxen, who could not stop fast enough despite Isaac's forceful pull on the ropes. He had fallen backwards into the cart, and the barrels in the cart had rolled onto his hand. Isaac had to turn the cart around while some of the blood froze on his fingers with his hand crushed and bleeding. Mary ran to her husband and took his hands in her own, to warm it before frost bite could do damage. She wailed as she did so.

"Mary, stop that noise, it's scaring the boys," snapped Isaac, still wrath over the incident and taking it out on his wife. Mary, stung by his retort, bit her lip and dropped his hands, but not before noticing that some fingers seemed to be broken. The angle at which they hung in her gentle palm was unnatural.

"Get some water into the kettle on the fire," she ordered her sons. Her feet felt like stones as she walked into the kitchen. She grabbed some clean cloth from the drawer and tossed it to her boy.

"Get some warm water onto the cloth and bathe your dad's fingers while I get the Doctor." She put on her cape and gloves, and walked out on Isaac's remonstrations.

"I don't need no doctor!" he yelled at her departing back.

<sup>26</sup> Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare*, 5.

"Try making more barrels with a set of broken fingers!" she shouted. Her intake of breath sharpened her lungs as tiny icicles cut into them. As she walked past Earth Hill, her own hands were freezing despite her gloves. Her nose turned red from the cold. She raced past Solomon's Hill and finally turned towards her sister Sarah's house. She wondered whether she and Sarah could set the fingers themselves. The Salem Village doctor might be in the vicinity, she knew. As luck would have it, she could just make out his carriage, drawn by a mule, coming from the Jacob house by Davenport/Putnam's Hill. She waved him down and spoke with sincere need.

"Doctor Griggs, my husband has broken parts of his hand in an accident. We would be so obliged if you would come see to his fingers," Mary begged.

"Of course, Goodwife Esty, I will do that. Climb into the carriage. Move over," the doctor instructed his servant. As he did so, the old doctor recalled the good price that Isaac Esty had given him on some special barrels for his medical supplies. An hour later, he cleaned up Isaac's hand after setting the fingerbones. The men talked about Betty Parris and Abigail Williams.

"Goodman Esty, you know I did my best for those girls, just as I've done for you," said the doctor.

"Dr. Griggs, I still think you were wrong to suggest the hand of evil in their afflictions. It could be something far more simple, like girls setting each other off to make noise, dive under the table, cry out, sit in trance, you never know what they'll think up. And they copy each other all the time. Who knows but what they just got carried away by their own fancy?" Isaac protested.

"Sir, you weren't there. You don't know all the cures I tried on them, but nothing worked. Only the Devil could bring such trouble. And we both know, that with the losses to the Indians on the western frontier, God has withdrawn his protection from the colony. We lost the Charter, and without a firm government, who knows what evils can creep into our homes, even our hearts. It's a situation ripe for the Enemy's exploitation."

Isaac appreciated the man's political grasp but objected to his conclusion. However, he knew better than to pursue the matter when he owed the doctor for fixing his fingers.

"How much do I owe you, sir, for the fine bone fixing you performed?"

While the men worked out the sum and Isaac showed him the door, Mary decided she needed to practice her own cure: she would try to dye some cloth to make spring costumes for her grandchildren.

Anything to ward off the depression creeping over her mind like a returning ache.

First, she knew, she had to isolate herself and pray. Her mind was unsettled and she needed to restore it with God's word. At that moment, Hannah came up behind her and anxiously announced that their best dairy cow was sick, and the servant had run off again.

"You don't mean it," replied Mary with irritation. "I told Isaac the last time that boy disappeared that we should replace him with someone reliable. Alright, Hannah, just let me get my boots on and I'll go out to the barn to see about the cow." Mary's boots were still wet from the trip to fetch the doctor. As she pulled them on over her stockings, she rubbed her feet ruefully. She began to feel put upon, frustrated, and even angry. If only Isaac had not yelled at her this morning, she wouldn't have lost her mental balance. There began a familiar process: the memories of Isaac's failure came flooding back to her. She tried to block the thoughts as they rushed down to swamp her peace. *Please, dear God, give me the victory over the evil in my own mind, and let me make every thought captive to Christ.* She pictured herself bending down at the cross and laying her basket of irritations at his feet. Then she pictured herself kissing his feet, warning them with her shawl, and wiping them with her hair, as the woman had done just days before the Crucifixion. *My trials are nothing compared to yours...you know every frustration we feel, you share every single pain. Dearest Lord, forgive me for my sins. I love you with all my heart. Thank you for giving me the victory over the Enemy.* Hannah looked over at her mother's face. She had seen the vexation, the frown, the pursed lips. Mary's expression had relaxed, however, and there was a small smile on her lips now.

"Do you need my help with the cow, mother?" she asked.

"No, darling, send Joshua out so that we can clean up the mess in the barn. Tell him to bring a bucket of water, and more hay. I'll take out a wrapped, heated brick so I can warm the cow's udders. She may have an infection. Usually she vomits only when she's impacted. I suppose she didn't get milked last night or today, with the servant gone. I'll see to her. Darling Hannah, will you see to the butter churning? We need to eat something soon, or we'll all get sick. Lunch was forgotten when your dad came in with his broken hand."

Mary tended to the cow; then she stopped to look about at the winter beauty. The green-black evergreen forests were lively with bird calls. She saw the brilliant plumage of a cardinal near the berries on the juniper tree. She reached into her apron to gather crumbs placed there from the morning's cleanup of the kitchen, and scattered them among the wilted



flower stalks at its base. As her form receded, she knew the bird was already pecking at his surprise feast. That afternoon she made some crisp oatmeal cake. After she had crumbled the oats, butter, salt, flour and sugar, she poured it into an oiled pan with a long handle. While it was baking over the fire, it came to her to serve it early, to Isaac, with some elderberry wine. Later, she could feed Hannah and the boys, but first there were reconciliations to arrange with her husband.

She called him to the fire and sat beside him with the glasses of wine and plate of cake on the table between them.

"Isaac, I know you were in pain from your poor fingers, but I did not like the way you spoke to me this morning. All day I have waited for a moment to reconcile with you. I hope you know that your welfare is my first thought."

"Ah, beloved Mary, you know I love you more than anything. I'm worried about the news that the doctor brought with him, while you were out of hearing. It seems that, forty miles north of here, the Indians burned 300 homes in York, Maine. Fifty have died in the fires. The news came with a messenger on January 25." Mary drew in her breath sharply. "This is terrible news, coming so soon after the last attacks," she murmured.

"Now you know what old Parris will do with this, down in Salem Village. He particularly despises our brother Francis Nurse, because Nurse stopped attending his sermons three months ago."

"I know that Rebecca warned him against serving on that parish committee that was voted in by the village in October. Did you know it was that same village meeting that voted against a special tax to pay the minister's salary?"

"Yes, Francis told me all about it. He had to serve on that committee, Mary. The villagers look up to him as being one of the few who will stand up to Parris. You know that they're trying to force Parris out."

"Parris is complaining that his family will freeze to death without firewood."

"That's one of the issues: Parris was supposed to find his own firewood, according to the original contract he signed."

"He seems like a very narrow minded man. Why doesn't he try to lead his flock with more consideration of their spiritual hunger? They want encouragement for their trials, not threats. I think he is power driven, Isaac, and that he will use any argument against his enemies. He will accuse them of consorting with the Devil if it serves his purposes."

"And the Wabanaki attacks will give him the fuel he needs to start another fire. He will turn it against the committee that opposes him."

"What else did Dr. Griggs tell you?"

"He said there's talk of a public day of fasting and prayer. Griggs called in other ministers to observe his niece, Betty Hubbard, and the other girls showing signs of affliction, as he calls it. They're barking like dogs, Mary, meowing like cats, and they show signs of wounds that have brought bruises and even blood."

"Do you think they are making it up?"

"It's hard to say—part of it certainly could be made up, but the wounds with blood, now that's questionable."

"Does anyone see them wound themselves?" asked Mary thoughtfully.

"I asked Griggs that, and he swears that he saw teeth marks appear before his eyes, and the girls were not biting themselves. Of course they could've done so earlier, and covered up the marks with their sleeves."

"If they are lying, we know that already the Enemy is involved, as he is the Father of Lies," she said.

"So the circle is complete: no matter how you look at it, the Devil is involved. The question is, where does it stop? You know, Mary, over in Groton, Elizabeth Knapp was cured by Rev. Samuel Willard without accusations like those Cotton Mather made against Goody Glover. Personally, I always thought Mather made too much of that case, when it could've been handled differently."

"Isaac, I am frightened. I'm so glad you have a good head on your shoulders. At least when we can talk about these things, they don't just rattle around inside of me like walnuts. We must shore up our strength and faith, and try to keep calm."

"Mary, you're the stable one. I get angry more quickly than you do. Recently I've been fighting my bad temper too often. Like this morning."

"Isaac, I married you precisely because you do not have a quick temper like my father did. He let himself go; he did not try to curb it. You always do your best to control yourself. When you're in pain, like this morning, it's hard not to let it out. Have some more wine," Mary said, pouring him another glass. "Now I'll go cook some dinner for the children." She took the candle with her, leaving Isaac in the firelight.

The next morning while she was sweeping the hearth, she was surprised to see her daughter Sarah coming up the path with three year old Benjamin waddling behind her, all wrapped up against the winter wind. She swung open the heavy door, and welcomed them warmly.

"What a joy to see you on this bleak morning, daughter!" she kissed Sarah's rosy, cold cheek.

"Mother, I have news that couldn't wait. A few weeks ago Uncle Samuel Nurse, together with Good men Tarbell and Wilkins, refused to take communion from Rev. Parris over at Salem Village."

"Yes, dear, Rebecca told me about that: it seems the Reverend has become obstinate and arbitrary, or so they say of him."

"Well, yesterday he preached against them in the pulpit. He condemned those who won't help him and he said they're refusing to do God's work.<sup>27</sup> And guess who came to my house in the afternoon to tell me? "Who was it?"

"Sarah Vibber, the woman you had to help you with the catechism lessons when I was younger, and Hannah was a little girl."

"Oh, that one. She couldn't see much good in people, and I had to correct her. She couldn't stand correction: it made her fly into a rage. She took each suggestion as a personal insult."

"Yes, I caught her spanking Hannah and I had to tell her she couldn't come back anymore. That was right after she told me that she couldn't work with me because my lesson mornings were too regulated and structured." Mary smoothed her palms on her apron and took her daughter Sarah's hands in her own. "I guess she wanted more freedom to make up activities on the spot, so that she could boss the children even more. I never could understand why she couldn't work with a regular schedule or plan, one that would make the children feel secure. They needed to know what was coming, and we needed the rhythm of the activities to spell out the mornings."

"I remember enjoying that little school as one of the best times in my childhood. Other mothers didn't welcome the neighborhood girls like you did."

"I too loved it." A warmth came into Mary's voice. "Remember, darling? We'd go into the woods on summer mornings and pick wild flowers, and trace their outlines onto fabric squares. Then we'd embroider them, and that's when I would teach the parables." Mary smiled at the memory of the shiny little heads bending over their embroidery hoops. "And you even did a chart of the flowers, with an especially nice picture of the Phlox."

"Yes, mother, and right after that you would get us all a treat. How you managed to save sugar for our goodies each day...especially when it

<sup>27</sup> Hoffer, *The Devil's Disciples*, 54.

was scarce. We loved those treats and the fresh milk or water you poured from the big blue crockery pitcher." Sarah kissed her mother and put her arms around her.

"Well, what did Sarah Vibber say when she came to tell you about Parris' sermon?"

"She took sly delight, mother, in telling me that Parris told everyone that those men on the committee who refused to help him do God's work, that they would pay in afterlife."

"As if he were the ultimate judge! What a nerve that man has!" Mary was indignant. "Why, there are no better men than Samuel Nurse on God's earth!"

"Parris also said that the Indian raids are God's judgment on us all for our sins."

"What do you mean, Sarah Vibber took sly delight in telling you?"

"Mother, she was smiling in this awful way. She seemed to want me to display some discomfort in her news. But of course I didn't. I wouldn't give her the satisfaction."

Mary shook her head slightly. "I remember that trait in her well. Once, when I had to correct another little girl, the most dreadful smile came over her face. I knew she was glad that the other child had done something wrong. I had to tell Sarah Vibber, and all of them, that when you look for the good, you will find it. I spoke of the other child's eagerness to do right, and found something to praise in her then and there, to wipe that awful smile from Sarah's face. Isn't she about 36 years old now?"

"Yes, and it seems only to have become worse. Mother, I don't trust her at all. You don't know what lies she may tell, if she's spreading this news about Uncle Samuel in such a mean way."

## The Horror Spreads

The cold dampness, wind driven by the black limbs of the oak trees, penetrated every corner in Puritan homes. People shuddered even in their beds, long before the coals in their bedpans had lost their heat. They turned over, seeking the warmth of the deepest spot, but found only the icy bed sections. Fear walked in their dreams.

Mary was filled with suffering. She kept it bottled within, but sometimes her heart felt it would split with tension.

Her sister Rebecca was one of the women accused by the afflicted girls. The spectral spirit of Rebecca was identified as attacking the girls.

Puritans believed that witches, after signing the devil's book as a covenant with Evil, had the power to project their spectral spirit anywhere they liked, while their physical bodies with their personalities intact, remained behind.

Mornings immediately after Mary got the news, when she awoke, thoughts would rush into her brain of what she had to do. Worse than this mental crowd were the doubts that also floated in like ghosts. Could she do her duties and chores amidst the strain? Villagers were turning away from her as if she were infected; they were the ones who loved the world's praise more than the praise of God.

She was most disappointed in Ann, the woman who had come from Maine as a survivor of the Indian raids, the mother of Constance. Mary had taken her in, had been friendly and hospitable, and had introduced her to others who could help her. She had offered her advice, had nurtured her establishment within the community. But at the first sign of trouble, Ann had withdrawn. She became formal, polite, and distanced herself in every way from Mary. Mary learned that she had been excluded from a gathering of women at Ann's home. It forced her to realize that she was no longer Ann's friend. She racked her brains to think of what the other woman had in common with her; that she lacked. Most of them were more caught up in material things than she was. Ann was often showing off some new bauble or fabric, and the other women followed suit. But it was painful to face the talking back of friendship, when she had done much to make Ann comfortable in the colony. When she prayed, God told her that disappointment came with unmet expectations; revise the expectations and cure the disappointment. Mary tried hard to swallow this lesson. She tried to train herself to wish only the best for Ann, to forgive her, to forget it. Of course Ann was frightened, because Mary's sister Rebecca had been accused, Mary knew that, but couldn't she put herself in Mary's place? Was comfort so scarce a commodity that she could offer her mentor none at all? Mary was painfully learning which Puritans thought of their own well being first. It was worrisome to put oneself out on a limb to help a friend in need, but Mary had always done so. It crossed her mind several times every single day to try and forgive them, and to pray for them. If she pictured the Holy Spirit hovering above them, the gentleness of the divine would transform the hard faces of these fair weather friends. And then, best of all, they would no longer be on her mind.

She had decided not to trouble her family with her complaints or worries. Their own suffering, their outcast state in the community, and their blameless guilt by contagion, were enough of a burden for them to

handle. Her daughters, especially, would be fearful that they might be the next accused. Everyone knew that the taint of witchcraft was inherited by close family members. Her poor elderly sister had broken down in front of her, wailing that she, Mary, might be next.

The extreme presence of evil has a way of infecting even those most resistant to it. Mary's anger at the unjust accusation of Rebecca snuck out in bursts of irritation that surprised her the most. When her husband asked for more bread, she snapped that she was trying to make the bread last longer, but that he could have more if he needed it. Then, when he kept at it, asking what her reasons were for withholding it at the start of the meal, she ignored him, thinking to herself that his better judgment would silence him. However, when he tried to bring it up a third time, she lost her temper, grabbed her plate, rushed up the stairs, and slammed the bedroom door behind her. Her daughter Hannah, still at the table, tried to reassure the shaken Isaac.

Mary looked out the window at their front meadow. The grass was greening up, and she knew that a few daffodil and crocus graced the green blades. She tried to focus on where she always looked for them at their first spring appearance; the big trees sheltered them from the wind. Mary looked down at her hands, at the tiny cracks near both ends of her thumb-nail, and her ring finger. The split skin made washing difficult. Whenever she immersed her hands in water, the tenderness of the flesh just above these cracks made painful any pressure. She had to adapt the way she pressed down upon them when folding, mending, or kneading.

She picked up the Bible and tried to calm down. Isaac was, she knew, a fair man, but he should know when to leave her alone. She decided to turn to the Psalms, and her eye was caught by the beautiful reassurances of God's presence. *Yet You are always near me; You hold my right hand. Your counsels guide me; afterwards You will lead me into Glory. Whom but you do I have in Heaven? And on earth I desire nothing besides You. My flesh and my heart will weaken, but you, God, are the strength of my heart, my portion forever.* If only she could keep her mind upon God at all times, she knew she could endure whatever might happen. God would never forsake her. God had embodied Himself in our Lord, Jesus Christ, to teach us how to live. His suffering on the cross had redeemed believers for eternity. What would it be like, eternity? She knew that she would be in heaven with the Holy Spirit, the principle of life, and with Christ. As she thought about the peace that would be hers in afterlife, her spirits lightened and she arose from her bed. She decided to apologize to Isaac, and set down the Bible on the quilted bed. She walked slowly down the

stairs, thanking God for his presence and the Holy Spirit. She entered the kitchen and spoke kindly to Isaac.

"Dear husband, forgive me for my outburst. I would never choose to upset thee. My mind has been overfilled lately and it came out on thee."

"Mary, you are a good woman, and you will always be first in my heart. We all share your suffering. Remember that whoever accuses you or your sister, accuses us also."

That was the wrong thing to say. Mary winced and turned back to the stairs. As she opened the door to the bedroom again and lay down on the bed, she wondered why Isaac continually mistook words of warning for comfort. Did he think she was unaware of the danger to their family? Did he not know that this was her greatest burden? She had heard that Constance, daughter of Ann who had excluded her from the women's gathering, was spreading malicious rumors about her. Constance had told Minister Parris about the January quilting party at Mary's house. She had elaborated upon Mary's words about seeking goodness instead of evil. Constance claimed to the minister that she thought Mary was encouraging spiritual blindness to the presence of the Devil in the community. Parris had seized upon these malicious words as pretext for questioning Mary, or so it was said. Mary knew that her own danger was great. She wept over the loss of the relationship with Constance and her mother Ann, though she knew it was no great loss. Repeatedly the younger woman had shown her alliances with the world and not with truth or with God. She comforted herself with Scripture: *I am the True Vine and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.* Mary knew that she would have to abandon all thought of a friendship with either Constance or her mother; they were the branches being cut off. But what, she wondered, is God's purpose in this trial of my family, my sister, and me? Mary knew she would have to pray deeply for the strength to endure this persecution. She could only hope that the purpose of it would be revealed to her in God's good time.

As she looked out the window, she saw that a late winter snowstorm was coming up. The dark clouds moved in quickly and the harsh winds would blow the daffodils low on the ground. She decided to rush out and cut them before they froze. Driving quickly over Salem and Topsfield, the northwesterly storm would hide beneath snowfall every trace of spring in the village, the fields, lakes and hills. She would have to hurry.

Isaac had already left the kitchen, she noticed with gratitude. She did not want to have conversation with him just now. She grabbed a knife and ran across the yard to the daffodils trembling in the cold. After she'd cut a goodly bunch, and her hands were blue in the freezing air, she straightened up to see a horse galloping by. It was Acorn, the erstwhile suitor in her youth. She turned her back quickly to the house, but not before she caught his stony glance. Maybe he's glad now that I didn't marry him, she thought bitterly. Well, I would not marry that coward if he were the last man in the world. *Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.* Acorn had just received some worldly honor from the community, his cowardice again rewarded, as usual, by those who could count on him never to oppose them. At this thought, the ugly fear arose again. She could feel it under her heart, turning like the head of a dead infant. She had miscarried twice, one a full term baby who died just a few days before birth. She had known the moment it had ceased to live.

Now the fear that pressed against the lower chambers of her heart began to swell. She wondered if she would go mad. *Because of the oppression of the weak and the groaning of the needy, I will now arise, says the Lord. I will protect them from those who malign them.* Suddenly Mary knew that the real demon would be madness, not imprisonment, trial and execution for witchcraft. The real demon, the one God would surely protect her from, would be the captivity of her mind in the state of insanity. If Satan could penetrate her mind, she would be lost. She must deny Satan this last bastion, since her brain and her mind belonged to Christ. She would fight to her last breath to deny Satan this refuge, and she would do it by talking constantly to God, seeking Christ in the beauty of the creation and in the faces and eyes of those who worshipped only Him. *You are always near me, God, You hold my right hand. Your counsels guide me, and afterwards you will lead me into glory. Whom but you have I in heaven? And on earth I desire nothing besides You.* The fear began to subside. *My flesh and my heart may weaken, but You, God, are the strength of my heart, my portion forever.* Mary's soul lightened with the knowledge that she was forever safe, her soul in God's hands, no matter what happened on earth. She was safe. Her soul was safe. She pictured the gentle hands of the Virgin holding her heart tenderly, and the heartbeats slowed to a normal pace. She could do it. She could keep her mind upon God. His strength would always keep the helmet of salvation surrounding her brain. Never would she give in to Satan; never would she lie to save her own life and say she had signed Satan's book.



The first snowflakes of the cold March day touched her hair as she opened the front door. Her sons had gone inside just before her. She offered to make them some hot grog to warm them up, and they smiled at her.

"Thou art such good men," she said to them, "and will never know how proud we are of that." As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she realized she shouldn't have brought up the subject of family pride. How were they to answer her, when her own social position was so low just now? To her surprise, Jacob hugged her and whispered in her ear, "We are proud of thee, too, no matter what people say. They don't know what good women the Towne sisters are." Mary hugged him tightly, and ruefully reminded herself that she mustn't blame Isaac for awkward words when she herself had used them. She couldn't let the accusations against her family ruin her family bonds.

The next day, a wan sun filtered through the clouds. Mary was outside again, trying to concentrate on her next chore. Her focus was so distracted, these days, that she had to keep going over mental lists to make sure she got everything done. Her worry kept circling around her unmarried daughter, Hannah. How would the young girl ever marry, if Rebecca, who faced an examination soon, or if she, Mary, were convicted of witchcraft? She knew Isaac would provide well for his daughter, even splitting the inheritance between her and the boys. But would Hannah be able to get along without her? The enormity of the social burden she would carry, as the daughter of an executed witch, was so heavy that Mary sat down suddenly on a half-frozen log. Her hands began to ache with the cold, and her neck could hardly support her head. Mary let it fall upon her breast. How could she deal with this loneliness? She looked down at her skirt, made from the wool that her daughter-in-law had carded from the sheep her oldest son raised. Thoughts of their family lifted her spirits: The grandchildren were healthy now, after the severe winter had passed. While she meditated with closed eyes near the house, her daughter Hannah noticed the natural beauty near the brook that ran behind the property.

### *Hannah and John Pyncheon*

**H**annah looked at herself in the still water of the early spring brook. The March weather had lately warmed to allow the rue anemone, or starflower, to show its sparkling white starry flowers among blue-green leaves. Hannah admired the clump of delicate blooms beside the brook,

and traced her long blonde hair away from her mouth. Hannah's blue eyes, tilted up at the corners, gave her a perpetual cheerful appearance. She thought back to the moment when John Pyncheon, scion of the wealthy Springfield Pynchons, had come into the woodworking shop where her father made barrels. She had been occupied with the ledgers, and had glanced up to see the handsome face, not two feet from her own. Since that day, she had pondered every detail of his visage. She had dreamed that they fell in love; that he adored her.

Though she tried hard to stifle the thought, she longed to carry out love's precepts in his embrace.

At the time that they first met, however, she had kept it simple.

"What can I do for you, sir?" she asked rising from the table where she worked.

"They say Isaac Esty makes the best barrels in this part of the colony," he said, smiling. "I'm John Pyncheon. Since business brought me from Springfield to Salem, I came out to Topsfield to buy some barrels. And who art thou?"

John held out his hand to grasp her own. Hannah looked deeply into the warm brown eyes of the stranger. She thought he was the best looking man she'd ever seen. Even his hands were clean, the fingers long and lean, not scratched or callous. She knew right away that he did no hard labor.

"I'm Hannah Esty, Isaac's daughter. Come with me to the outbuilding where he's assembling some barrels that might be of interest." The tall man followed her out the door and down the woodland path by the brook.

"Might we sit down for a short time on this ledge?" John asked, pointing to the outcropping of stone by the brook. "It was a long ride this morning." Surprised, Hannah agreed, and sat beside him, gathering her dark wool skirts around her. Her pale yellow shirt, gathered at the wrists, set off her fair skin. The blue of her weskit matched her beautiful eyes.

"The earth is damp, this time of year, with the snows so recently gone," she observed, turning from her reflection to face him again. She cocked her head to one side, the better to see his face, shaded as it was by the big oak trees. John suddenly grasped her hand again and raised it to his lips. Hannah swiftly rose and resumed the walk to the barrel assembly building. She called over her shoulder,

"My father is right down there; the building is just over this small rise," but John had scrambled after her.

"I regret if I offended thee," he said slowly, "Please forgive me." His voice sounded sincere.

"Mr. Pyncheon, the Springfield girls must be different from those of us brought up nearer the coast. We don't allow such familiarities." Hannah had to turn her head away to keep him from seeing her face. She did not want him to see that she was not angry. He handed her a wiry stem of starflowers.

"Flowers for the prettiest girl in the colony," he said. Then he walked off down the hill to the barrel shop.

Hannah was left looking at the flowers and wondering if she would see him after he concluded his business with her father. She relaxed her shoulders, swung her arms out, and danced down the other side of the hill. She felt a lightness in her spirit that had never been there before. She wandered into the kitchen where her mother was preparing dough.

"Hannah, dear child," said Mary, when she saw her daughter's face. "It's so good to see a smile for a change."

"Mother, do I look alright in this collar?" Hannah asked, her eyes becoming serious under her mother's fond gaze.

"Of course, darling! That's the new one we made just last week. Why, does it scratch? Is it too tight?"

"No, I just wondered. If I stay here to help with the cooking, maybe there'll be time for us to work on my new skirt this afternoon?" Mary thought to herself, *this is the first time in months that Hannah has expressed any interest in her clothes or the way she looks. What's going on?* Aloud she said, "Yes, of course, we will work on the skirt. Maybe we can finish it. What's that?" She pointed to the girl's hand.

"Starflowers are out already, down by the brook. Aren't they pretty? I counted eleven white petals on this bloom, around the little yellow centers."

In the barrel assembly house, Isaac sat with his head in his hands. He was at a loss, how to deal with the accusations against Mary's family. He wondered how Francis, his brother-in-law, could walk through Salem Village without making a fist to punch the first of them that he met. Francis, the father of Samuel, was just as strong as he, Isaac, himself. Isaac knew he was strong, but this ordeal was testing his strength. He knew he did not have the depth of faith Mary owned; sometimes in the past he had thought she had too much of it. It annoyed him. Sometimes he had become exasperated with her constant references to God's goodness. It crossed his mind that her faith might well be tested as much as his own, or even more. That would be worse than anything for her, he realized.

Mary and her faith were one and the same. If she lost her faith, she would lose herself. He feared that she would collapse without it. So, he thought, at least I know what to pray. *Dear Lord, help my wife to bear this burden that has fallen upon her. Increase her faith and do not abandon her.* Since Isaac's prayers were always brief and to the point, they ended. He stopped there. When he opened his eyes, a man stood quietly in the doorway, awaiting a signal to enter.

"Come in, stranger, what can I do for thee?" Isaac asked. He was pleased to see a distraction from the unrelieved gloom surrounding him. Isaac got up slowly; his joints were painful and creaky in the damp cold weather.

"I came to inquire about barrels; nobody makes them better, so I hear," was the genial reply. John looked around him. It was clear that Isaac was a prosperous craftsman; the neat workroom was cleanswept, and the barrels were placed in orderly rows near the corners. In the midst, Isaac was assembling the hoops and planks of another barrel.

"Well, we have a goodly supply to choose from," Isaac said with a smile. "I haven't seen thee around these parts."

"I'm John Pyncheon. I live in Springfield. I had business in Salem, and heard from Mr. Tarbell that yours were the best barrels I'm needing."

Back in the house, the excitement was building. News had arrived that Rebecca was summoned to be examined on March 23. Hannah ran out to the barrel assembly room. She just missed him. John Pyncheon had concluded his business with Isaac, and had traced his way beside the brook back to his horse. He had departed. Hannah walked back to the brook but he was nowhere to be seen. She wondered if she'd ever see him again, this sweet man of her heart.

As she walked slowly back to the outbuilding, Hannah knew that she should forget him. Her family was in danger, and that was more important. Hannah burst into the workshop with the news for her father.

"You know that Tiruba, the slave of Parris, and those two she named, Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne, are still in the Boston jail. Well now, the two she wouldn't name have been identified as Martha Corey and our Aunt Rebecca, and at Ann Putnam's evidence, she saw the shape of Goodwife Corey. She thought Goodwife Nurse was praying at the same time to the devil."

"Yes, daughter. I heard about that accusation. Ann Putnam also said that she wasn't sure it was Aunt Rebecca. She thought it was, but very sure she saw the shape of Goodwife Corey."

"Father, our Aunt Rebecca did not go to see the afflicted, nor did she visit the parsonage."

"No, because she was ill with stomach sickness again. Also, Hannah, she is frail. She was afraid the fits were contagious and she didn't want to catch them herself. But Francis told me she did ask about the afflicted girls as soon as the men came to her bedroom."

"Deodat Lawson had gone to the Parris parsonage from where he stays at Ingersoll's Inn, and Abigail Williams had a fit right in front of him." Isaac looked at Hannah as she continued.

"She was at first 'hurried with violence to and fro in the room, although Mr. Ingersoll endeavored to hold her. She sometimes made as if to fly, stretching up her arms as high as she could and crying, 'Whish, whish, whish!' several times. Presently after, reported Lawson, She said there was Goodwife Nurse and said, 'Do you not see her? Why there she stands!' she also said that Goodwife Nurse offered her the book, but she was resolved not to take it saying, 'I won't, I won't, I won't take it. I do not know what book it is; I am sure it is none of God's book. It is already the devil's book for aught I know.'"<sup>28</sup>

"Daughter, we must remain calm. Your mother is already dreadfully upset, and I do not wish her to be more so. Promise me you won't bring this up. No doubt she will hear of it from her sister Sarah. We, her close family, must try at all costs to protect her spirit. Why should we bring up these issues and force her to focus on them, when she may not be thinking of them?"

Hannah looked at him in perplexity.

"Father, you seem to think there are times when Mother is not thinking about this. I know for a fact that it never leaves her mind except when she is sleeping."

Isaac turned away. He did not know what to do; he felt helpless. Hannah saw his distress and put her hand on his arm. "Alright, if it pleases you I will not bring it up." She kissed him on the cheek. Hannah privately thought, *How like a man, to keep issues quiet, as if that could make them go away. This is one promise I know I will break. If I see Mother's face, and she doesn't know about this, I won't be able to keep from telling her. Maybe if I go for a walk, that will keep me away from the house for a bit.*

In the three days that followed, Hannah took several walks. She tried to get her mind off of John Pyncheon, but her inner eyes contemplated his nose, his eyes, his chin, and his lips. She wondered what it would be like to kiss him.

The weather had turned windy, and the cold damp spurred Hannah to walk fast. She cleared the brook in one jump, and over the hillside she picked up the road. Up ahead, on the top of the next hill, she could see a horse and rider. Just as she was ascending the dirt road and the wind gusts were blowing her woolen skirts the opposite way, impeding her progress, the rider pulled up the horse many yards in front of her. She could see the lacy green buds on the tip of the tree trunks where he tethered the horse.

"Mistress Estry, what a pleasure," said handsome young John Pyncheon as he extended his hand in greeting. Hannah felt like the sun had just risen within her, so warm was her response. She grasped his hand and then took it in both of her smaller ones.

"I didn't expect to come upon thee like this," she said haltingly, wondering if she should share the news about Rebecca's examination with him. *No, like a man he will have different ideas from mine. I should softly talk about it with my own family.* "Tell me about the barrels. Didst thou find any of them useful for business?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I did." John looked into the wide blue eyes of the blonde-haired woman. Her cheeks were warming with a blush, and as her pearl teeth opened to speak, he thought, *She's even more beautiful than I kept picturing these days away from her. I'd best not speak of it directly, however, as it would embarrass her and she'd turn away from me again like the last time.*

"We met just three days ago! You speak as if it were already some time past," Hannah laughed again. "Let me introduce my brother," she said. Jacob spoke politely to the stranger, but he pulled at Hannah's arm.

"Sister, we must get back to the house right away." Hannah did not question him, as there was no point in it. She would have to obey her brother. "I hope we will meet again," she said to Pyncheon as they turned away. Thus began the courtship that would bind their hearts together. The couple would long for each other through the coming months. When Hannah and Jacob reached the Estry home, Mary was not there. She had gone to Rebecca.

## Mary Consoles Rebecca

"Mary, what have I done to bring this misfortune? What punishment has befallen me for my unknown wickedness? I've been trying to remember what I have done, that might anger our Lord. Surely I deserve this ordeal, or it would not be my lot." The frail shoulders of her elder sister shook as she held Mary's hands.

"Rebecca, I believe in your goodness with all my heart. Your heart is pure. No crime of witchcraft stains your mind or your hands. You are not guilty." Mary's loving voice became stronger as she pronounced the words.

"Thank thee," murmured Rebecca as the tears rolled down her cheeks. Mary sat down on the bedstead and put her arms about her sister, who seemed to have shrunk by half under the psychic weight of the court summons. Her heart opened in sympathy as she felt Rebecca's vulnerability through her shaking shoulders.

"Come now, dear sister, dry your eyes. We must gather our strength for the coming examination," Mary soothed. I will be right beside you all the while. Remember Psalm 73, *I am always near You, God. You hold my right hand. Your counsels guide me; afterward you will lead me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And I desire nothing besides you. My heart and my flesh may weaken, but you, God, are the strength of my heart, my portion forever.*"

Mary could hear the tabby cat, her sister's pet, crying in the next room. She got up slowly and went to retrieve the pet. She whispered softly to it as she carried it to Rebecca's bed.

"See now, sister, thy pet feels distress too. I must tell you both about the flowers I saw this morning." Mary knew that the one subject her sister couldn't resist was that of gardening, and especially raising flowers. Something about the perfections and fragility of blooming plants spoke to her reverence for life, like nothing else in creation. "There are already daffodils opening under our front copse! You know, the one with birch and evergreen trees by the road. I will bring some to have by your bedside. Rebecca, I want you to close your eyes and picture the fluted yellow trumpet of the daffodils, with the pure orange stamen and the delicate scent. Let me message thy temples as you picture them. I will do the same, and together we will share a vision of the fragrant beauty that announces spring."

Rebecca smiled at Mary and settled down in the bed. She placed her head in Mary's lap as her sister sat down near the headboard. Rebecca could smell the fresh air in Mary's apron as she turned her nose toward Mary's stomach. Her cool fingers began to circle Rebecca's temples gently.

"Now picture the green stalks of the leaves, now the neck of the daffodil swaying....now notice the perfect symmetry of the golden petals, serrated just at the tips." Mary looked down at her beloved sister's wrinkled face. The facial lines began to soften as the visual image clarified in her mind. Mary closed her own eyes and leaned back against the pillows. The

minutes passed, and both women fell into a doze. When Francis quietly opened the door again, he could see the tableau of the women outlined against the wall, the cat beside them on the bed, all lit up in silhouette by the candle before them on the bedside table.

## After the Court Examination

Mary tried to recall the main points of the examination. Now it was late March and poor Rebecca, deaf as she was, had become confused during the questioning. She had insisted upon her innocence. She stated that she believed Satan could assume the shape of an innocent person to afflict others. Deodat Lawson had preached, that very afternoon, his concurrence with this belief. Rebecca had stated that she was innocent. The legal question that would twist throughout the hearings and trials would rest upon this point. Some, like William Stoughton, Deputy Governor of Massachusetts, would agree with Rev. Samuel Parris, who would preach the very next Meeting Day, that Satan could NOT assume the shape of innocent people, only of those who signed his book and worshipped him. Thus, the accusation of witchcraft, from the afflicted girls, was as good as proof of guilt. The accused had no defense against these imagined accusations.

Others would not go along with the process. Thirty nine people had signed a document, after Rebecca Nurse's examination, that she was a God-fearing woman and their long knowledge of her maintained the accuracy of her innocence. Families were split down the middle. The Putnams, and the Holtons, had members both for and against Rebecca. Widow Holton blamed her husband's death upon Rebecca's cursed witchcraft, which dated, she said, to the incident of the Holton's swine getting into her vegetable garden.

Nevertheless, Rebecca had been taken to the jail. She was fettered in irons with chains to the stone wall. Ann Putnam Jr. had been, so she said, struck with a chain and a round ring, at a distance from the jail, so testified Edward and John Putnam.

Later, Rebecca's son-in-law witnessed that on March 28<sup>th</sup>, he had been at Thomas Putnam's house. "Upon disclosure of many things, I asked them some questions and among others I asked this question whether the girl that was afflicted did first speak [of] Goody Nurse before others mentioned her to her. They said she told them she saw the apparition of a pale faced woman that sat in her grandmother's seat but did not



know her name. Then I replied and said, 'but who was it that told her that it was Goody Nurse?' Mercy Lewis said it was Goody Putnam that said it was Goody Nurse. Goody Putnam said it was Mercy Lewis that told her. Thus they turned it upon one another, saying 'it was you and it was you that told her.' This was before any was afflicted at Thomas Putnam's besides his daughter.<sup>29</sup>

When Isaac put his arms around Mary to steady and comfort her, he felt her stiffen with resistance. She was still in shock, he told himself. He lifted her face to his and kissed her forehead tenderly. "Thou art strong, my dear wife; we will weather this together, with God's help." She tried to smile at him, but Rebecca's exhausted face came before her eyes.

"Let's plan the food we can take to the jail," she said, hoping for some distraction. "She likes chicken and fish. Could you go into the barnyard and slaughter a chicken, that I might take her some chicken pie?" Isaac nodded and turned away. The feeding of prisoners was left up to their families. There was no kitchen, no means to heat the jail, and no provisions for sanitary facilities except a slop bucket. Poor Rebecca had been chained sitting down. How would she sleep?

### Hannah and Mary

When the accusation against Rebecca first came down, Mary felt disbelief. She could not stop thinking about it. Even upon awaking, her first thought would surface as *How could this happen to Rebecca?* She would struggle to praise God in the midst of her confusion, her attempts to praise God ending in some comfort but also the warning that she must achieve mental discipline. She must retain control of her thoughts in order to continue her mission and purpose in life, that of glorifying God. Mary vowed that she would not give into this new Devil's trap. Her mind would be a clear reflection of God's goodness and glory. She would only devote a specific time, each mid day, when the light was at its strongest on wintry days, to ponder the situation. The mornings, afternoons and evenings would be her own to pray, to comfort her family, to do her chores. As she thought about prayer, she looked for her Bible. But it was not where she usually kept it, in the table drawer beside her bed. She began to search for it through the house. Who could have taken it? All the Esty family had their own Bibles. Isaac had insisted

<sup>29</sup> McMillan, 234.

upon giving each member a missal when they came of age. So, who could have taken it? And for what reason?

Hannah came in from the cold wind, her cheeks glowing. She stopped short when she saw her mother's face.

"Did you borrow my Bible?" Mary demanded.

"I took it yesterday—I needed it for catechism class because I misplaced mine." Hannah could see the anger growing in her mother's face.

"Why didn't you ask me? You don't seem very apologetic, and it's a serious matter, taking someone's Bible. Where is it? Why didn't you ask me?" Mary's voice rose as she saw the muscles tighten around Hannah's mouth. That happened whenever her daughter became defensive.

"I am already upset about something, Mother."

"I don't care if you are already upset! My Bible is missing! How would you like it if someone took your Bible without asking you?"

"Stop yelling at me, Mother. I think one of the boys did take my Bible. I will get yours right away."

"I still don't hear an apology! You cannot just take my Bible when you have misplaced your own! Hannah, you will have to stay in the home for the next two days. I cannot abide your attitude. You are not sorry even now, when you see how disturbed I am." Mary was no longer yelling but her voice was cold.

Hannah stomped out of the room and up the stairs. She slammed her bedroom door. Mary sat down at the kitchen table. She knew that her anger was misdirected against her daughter. It really belonged elsewhere. She knew that it had to do with the injustice against Rebecca. Mary held her head in her hands. She tried to calm down. She went upstairs and knocked on Hannah's door. She apologized for losing her temper. Hannah came to the door and looked stony faced at her mother.

"All right," she said in a monotone.

Mary turned and went back down the stairs. Once more she ascended them and asked for her Bible. She was glad to regain her self control. Hannah handed the missal to her and Mary descended the stairs again. At the kitchen table, she opened it to psalms. The vision of young David as a shepherd, followed by his rise to power as leader, served to calm her. After awhile the old questions returned. Why Rebecca?

The pattern began again: questioning, indignation, outrage. The indisputable innocence of Rebecca was crystal clear. Anyone in the village would vouch for her. She was known to be gentle in her opinions, kind to the oppressed, helpful and wise in her advice. Mary expected the many people who had gained from this kindness to express their loyalty to her

sister. In that, she was wrong. People began to withdraw from the Towne sisters. When she sought affirmation and reinforcement from the elders, often they turned away from Mary, frowning, only to walk off and leave her stranded. She felt abandoned as never before. She began to recall the Glover witchcraft case. When she spoke to Rebecca, she hoped that she'd have developed a mental list of probable supporters and traitors to Rebecca's cause, that of innocence.

Eventually, reason prevailed, as Mary struggled to bring every thought captive to Christ. She even tried to feel a certain sympathy for the afflicted girls, just as Rebecca had expressed upon first learning of it.

On March 13<sup>th</sup>, she had fully expected the examination to end in resolution and acquittal.

When the verdict came down, and her sister was hauled off to jail, Mary was stunned. Something inside her was broken, an inner coherence that relied upon the congruence between human and divine justice. She could only retreat into herself and remain walled off from the world. Although she did function, she was numb to feeling. Hannah noticed it first, when she saw her mother's blank face. Joshua had just injured himself—a severe headblow when he was knocked off his horse by a falling tree limb—and when his father carried him into the house, Mary said nothing. The blank look didn't change as she moved to fulfill the orders given her by her husband Isaac. To Hannah, this change was even more frightening than her aunt's sentence to jail to await trial. Hannah felt her own stability begin to waver, as she watched her mother clean and dress her brother's head wound.

Isaac went into a fury that he could hardly maintain within himself. His horror at the jailing of Rebecca Nurse was followed by rage. The insanity of the accusation was reinforced by those scheming little girls. No doubt they were encouraged by the magistrates who served so badly on the frontier and who needed a distraction for the people. It was so ludicrous that he expected any moment to awaken from the nightmare reality of his son's fall.

He wonders: is it money that affects these girls and those who house them? Can they not afford their food and wood? Is it something that I said that was distorted by one of the group? Who would that be? Is it a decision to eliminate extra effort? Priorities? Why the alliance between two racially different and personality opposite females? He wonders: the accident to one woman's spouse, the overwhelming life of another at stake. What is the matter with this community? How can they believe the stupid accusations of silly young girls? Why were the girls coming forth with

these totally outrageous lies?

Isaac had a theory about the girls. He tried to talk to Mary about it. She was very impatient and almost unable to listen. He felt his wife slipping away from him. He saw her face change, from the gentle, sweet woman to a distant, cold one. She was easily annoyed. Finally he decided to just come out with it.

"Mary, I know what is driving those girls—it's power!" he fairly shouted at her. "It's the first time they've been made to feel important! The way they are being questioned, they are almost forced to come up with names, and they do it to meet the expectations! I think some of them are pathological liars too—after they make the accusation, then they begin to believe it themselves. I don't know where it's all going, but I'm sure it's not good."

The relief of speaking his mind came as a burden lifted off Isaac's shoulders. He felt so much better that his mood altogether changed. He looked at Mary, staring out the window, and noticed the curve of her breast under her apron. Suddenly he felt a surge of desire. He put out his hand and touched her face.

"Mary, would you like to...could we..."

Mary looked down at her hands.

"I'm sorry, Isaac. I just couldn't right now. Maybe later. Please forgive me."

Isaac dropped his hand and turned to the kitchen door. On his way out, he grabbed his jacket from the rack near the door. Mary watched him go. She felt some alarm. Was she going to drive away her whole family? She had yelled at her daughter unfairly, and now she had denied her husband. That had not happened before. She thought it a bad sign.

An hour later, Mary saw Sarah Goode loping up the path with her four year old daughter, Dorcas. Mary instinctively wanted to hide, so that Sarah would go away. But Sarah persisted in knocking on the door. She went to the front window and tapped on the glass.

"I know you're in there, Mary Esty, your husband Isaac told me. I know you are hiding from me."

Mary's heart sank. She was already angry due to Rebecca's arrest. Sarah Goode would try her patience beyond its limits. Sarah drank heavily, and the alcohol had affected her brain. She was doubly slow in everything: in making decisions, in entering and exiting, in running after Dorcas. The one thing she was not slow about was in the use of foul language. It poured out of her mouth like human sewage. Sarah was the most unpleasant person in the colony, moreso even than Judge Acorn.

Mary reluctantly opened the door and stepped outside before Sarah could push her way in.

"Oh, so that's the way of it, is it?" she said loudly, her rotten teeth inches from Mary's nose. "That's not much of a welcome from a good Christian woman." Sarah knew how to hit a nerve. Mary's brows knit convulsively.

"What do you want, Sarah? I don't have time for you today." At that moment she saw Isaac coming up the walk. He stopped as he saw the incident unfold between the women.

"I want a blanket for Dorcas. We've been thrown out of the barn where we were sleeping, and cannot find another. Of course, if we could stay in your barn."

"I'm afraid that is impossible, Sarah. Isaac is using the barn as storage for some barrels. There just isn't room. Besides, it's as cold in there as it is outside. And the oxen move around freely in their stalls."

"Well, the least you could do, is offer us some blankets."

"Wait here, and I will bring something to you," said Mary. Sarah scowled.

"Not something, mistress. I said, BLANKETS."

"Sarah, my family doesn't keep many spare bedclothes, as we give whatever we have left over, away. I said, Sarah, that I will bring you something." Mary added firmly, "Wait here." Mary went upstairs to the bedrooms and looked in the chest at the foot of the marriage bed. She selected a large woolen blanket that she had made, herself, last summer. As she descended downstairs into the hallway that led to the front door, she could smell the pipe that Sarah was smoking.

"Sarah, you could set my house on fire, not to mention your own little girl," Mary remonstrated, as she opened the door and eased herself outside. "Here's a large coverlet that I made myself, last summer. It is large enough to double over, so that you and Dorcas can sleep upon it and have enough left over to cover yourselves. Now excuse me, as I must go back to my work."

Mary felt a pang of guilt as she saw the pinched face of the little girl. She resolved to make the child a dress with the material leftover from Hannah's skirt and vest. She would start upon it this very night.

Meanwhile, her conscience continued to plague her, as she saw the clouds gathering. *Poor Dorcas will catch her death of cold tonight, if she can't sleep under a roof. It looks like more snow.* She turned to Isaac who was carving wood before the fireplace.

"Isaac, do you think Dorcas will survive the night? She and her mother were turned out of the barn where they slept in the past few weeks.

"Mary, before I came home, I saw them encamped in the hunter's shelter that our neighbors put up way down near the river. They'll be alright. I saw that you carried outside to her the blanket that you made." Isaac looked cross. Mary recalled his frugality with their children, and decided to change the subject.

"I cannot stop thinking about Rebecca in the cold stone jail. I believe we should go there tomorrow and take her some food and clothing. Whatever Francis and Samuel have taken to her, surely more could be useful then."

"Seems to me you could've saved that blanket for your sister, and not wasted it on that tramp, Sarah Good."

"Possibly I could have done so, had you not told her that I was at home this afternoon. Well, dear husband, no matter. I love you for your hard work, your courage and your kindness to me." Holding hands, they climbed up the stairs to their bed.

### John Pyncheon Returns

Spring came very slowly to Topsisfield. One day was slightly warm and breezy, the next freezing. The cold morning chill awoke Hannah who turned over in her bed, trying to get warm. She wondered why her mother had not made up the fire yet. Hannah put on her shoes, her shawl over her shoulders, and crept downstairs quietly. It was still dark. Hannah did not know that her mother, who had not been able to sleep, was finally getting some rest beside her husband. Hannah put the firewood onto the hearth and sat down on the settle to watch the embers catch the dry sticks into flame. She thought of John Pyncheon, whose kind eyes had opened in her memory since the first day they met.

Hannah was so tired of the worry that she felt sick. She wondered if the aches in her muscles meant that another round of illness was invading the Village. She sat there feeling awful, and shivered with the cold. Then Mary sat down beside her daughter and put her arms around her silently. The women comforted each other without words. Mary arose and went into the kitchen. She asked her daughter kindly if she would like some warm water to bathe her face. Hannah smiled wanly and nodded. She watched her mother lift a large ladle handle from the pot above

the fire, and spoon some hot water into a wash bowl. With the bowl before her, and the dawn breaking in the windows behind her, she could barely see her reflection. She recalled the morning, not too long ago, when John Pyncheon had come into her life. Would she ever see him again? Would he want anything to do with her, a woman descended from a family that included an accused witch? She shook her head, angry at herself, that she had placed her own interests ahead of her aunt's very life.

Later that morning, she was out in the shop helping her father, when she heard a knock. When she opened the door, she could hardly breathe. There stood John Pyncheon, tall and lean, his brown eyes smiling down at her.

"Come outside in the sun for a moment, Mistress Esty. I have something to give thee." Hannah smiled at him and took his hand. She followed him out onto the path before the shop.

"It is so good to see thee, John. I can hardly trust myself to speak; the happiness thy face brings to me," she stammered. Immediately she bit her tongue. How could she tell him that, without losing her distance, without losing his respect for her? Hannah lowered her head in confusion.

"I have thought of no one else since the moment I saw thee," John said to her quietly, still holding onto her hand. "I heard about poor, innocent old Rebecca Nurse—news of such arrests travels swiftly to Springfield—and I knew thou would be suffering too. I came to give thee support." When his kind words penetrated her brain, Hannah's face crumpled and the pain was visible in her expression. John opened his arms and gathered her in a warm embrace. He placed her head against his chest and held her close. Hannah felt a comfort she had never known before. How could this man know what was in her heart? She stayed in his arms for a long time. No thought, but only comfort bathed them both. His strong fingers caressed her hair gently and the tension in his arm tightened to draw her even closer. She wanted him to hold her forever. Suddenly they heard footsteps coming around the shop, and they broke apart. Isaac walked slowly with his head down, and he did not see how close were the two before they turned away from each other to face him.

"Good morning, sir," said John to the older man. "I came back to buy some more of your barrels. I hope you have more on hand?" Isaac nodded. He looked at his daughter.

"Hannah, it is so cold in the shop. Could you bring us something hot to drink?" Hannah smiled as she hurried back to the house. *He actually*

*came to me! He came to offer his support to us! I am so blessed, so enriched by his presence. He's even taller than I remembered!* She opened the back door and fairly danced into the kitchen. Mary looked up from the table where she was peeling root vegetables.

"Hannah, what has happened? You look so different!" Mary was hoping that maybe Rebecca had been released by some miracle.

"Father has a customer! The man is back for more of his barrels! Father asked me to bring something hot to the shop for them to drink. Is there any more of the sumac liquid left, for hot tea?" Earlier that week, in the pantry Hannah had found some edible berries gathered from sumac flower heads, and had bruised them in her hands, then let them settle in water. She had removed the small hairs and debris from the thick red fruit clusters, through a grass strainer that she'd made.

"Yes, there is some left. Heat it there over the fire: the pot's empty," said Mary.

Hannah took the hot drink in mugs to the shop. John sipped his gratefully. "This tastes like citrus," he said, "but I don't recognize it as lemon or orange."

"No, because it isn't," Hannah smiled. "It's sumac—and no, it's not from the poisonous berries but the edible ones. We gather the fruit clusters and bruise and liquefy them, then strain them and heat the liquid. It has medicinal properties too, for sore throats and for canker sores. You must come back for some if you ever have those problems," she added cheerfully. Isaac gave her a dark look under his lowered brow. Hannah stopped herself and stammered, "that is, if you still have the cough."

"Ah, yes, the cough I mentioned a moment ago, that I seemed to pick up on the ride from Springfield this day." John turned to Isaac. "Does the wind also bother your throat this spring? It seems to have more dust in it than usual." John looked earnestly at Isaac.

"That will be all, Hannah. Go and help your mother in the kitchen now," said Isaac sternly, more sternly than he intended. "Come back again in a little while to help me with the ledgers," he added, in a kinder tone.

As the men were loading barrels onto the cart that Isaac offered to loan John, Hannah came out from the house. She offered to help hitch John's horse to the cart. He asked her to hold the horse while he placed the harness just so. Hannah knew that her father was watching her carefully, and she didn't dare to look at John, much less to touch him. But when he said goodbye, stating that he would be back in a few days to return the cart, she couldn't keep from smiling. After Isaac turned away to go back into the shop, she waved gaily at the departing cart. John



waved back. He then took off his hat and waved it too. Hannah put her hands up to her mouth and blew him a kiss. Isaac just missed seeing it, as he had come back outdoors to see what had delayed Hannah from joining him at the ledgers.

"Hannah, thou must be careful when speaking to strangers," he said gently. Isaac knew that young people are guided by strong feelings when they are attracted. However, he did not want to spoil a pleasant moment for Hannah. After all, there were so few pleasures in Salem Village for his family.

Hannah said nothing, but she took her father's hand and squeezed it as they returned to the shop. From that moment, Hannah and John contemplated each other from a distance and longed to carry out all of love's precepts in the other's embrace. John was an independent thinker. His wealthy family had allowed him to pursue his own interests in education and business. He was well read, and he had the kind of self confidence that birth and background bestow upon the strong. But his heart was warm and open; he'd given it to no woman before Hannah. Therefore, the strength of his passion for her was almost overpowering. He could think of practically nothing else until the next plan to see her was in place. John had no doubt that he could marry Hannah and take her far from Salem. The wishes of his own family meant nothing to him compared to his love for this girl. For her part, Hannah saw John as something of a healer: his love healed her broken heart, her bruised spirit and her hopes for the future. She too was unable to rest until the next plan to see him was in place, but she knew well the danger for her if their relationship became public. The evil girls who had accused her aunt would stop at nothing, especially not at accusing someone close to their own age who had aroused their jealousy. And envy would quickly strengthen suspicion into accusation.

### Samuel Parris and Judge Acorn

Parris was angry and elated at the same time. He knew that Satan had conquered the weak walls of Salem Village, and moreover that the girls were accusing the right worshippers of the devil. He knew the Nurse family was corrupted, and that Rebecca Nurse was guilty despite the many who vouched for her innocence. He was angry because, during the loss of his support among the Topsfield residents, he suspected the presence of the Dark One.

His own efforts could not have been greater, to fight off the demon and to warn the residents. Had he not told them that, in rejecting his leadership, they were opening the door for the Devil? Had he not warned them repeatedly, that he was Christ's representative to them, and they must obey him, or be lost?

His meditations were interrupted by a knock at the outer door of the parsonage. "Tituba, see who is there. Then finish your chores. If one of the magistrates is calling, you may need to prepare tea for us." Tituba left the kitchen and ran to the door. It was Judge Acorn, he of the short stature. Tituba had heard of him.

"Judge Acorn, come in, please sir. Let me take your jacket," Tituba greeted. She helped remove his outer clothing and hung it on the rack near the door. "Rev. Parris is in the study," she said, pointing the way.

"Thank you, I know the way," said Acorn, who never admitted anything he did not know, including the way about the house of an acquaintance.

"Sit down, Judge Acorn," offered Parris, pointing to a chair near the fireplace. "It's still quite cold these days. I'm afraid we are out of wood, but I can offer you a hot drink," he smiled. Judge Acorn pretended not to notice the shabby surroundings.

"I've come to talk with you about the Towne sisters," he said. "I happen to know something of the family, because they came to the colonies just about the same time as my own parents."

"Ah, yes. Well, that Samuel Nurse, he is a wild one. He refused communion and I fear that he is open to the dark side." Rev. Parris looked over at his guest with a significant raise of the eyebrows.

"Yes, that doesn't surprise me, doesn't surprise me at all," said Acorn. "You know, I think that Rebecca's sister Mary has followed her bad example into the evil influence." Acorn related the story of Mary remonstrating with the boys in the square. "She refused to take direction from me. And recently she spoke rudely to me in the presence of other magistrates." There followed the incident of the barrel site inspection that ended with his own deflection of business away from the Estys.

"That goes along with the wicked temper of her sister, Rebecca," said the minister. "The Holtons have given evidence of Rebecca's screaming at them and attacking their pigs," murmured Parris. "Ah, here is Tituba with our tea. You may place it there," he said. After the men had talked for another half hour, Acorn rose to leave.

"Now, I wouldn't for the life of me accuse innocents of witchcraft," he said, "but these Towne women seem to track after their mother, Joanna. Recall that she was accused of it when she refused to accept the

verdict against the first minister. We all know what he was," Acorn added.

"I am grateful for your concern, Judge, and I will ponder it carefully," said his host.

Hannah saw Acorn riding by their driveway as she was waiting for John Pyncheon, who had arrived earlier and had managed to catch her out with the livestock. She'd agreed to await him near the front entrance to the home. Judge Acorn had disappeared down the Salem road, when she saw John riding up. He pointed to the pines at the edge of the property, and rode over to await her.

"My dearest girl," he said, as he dismounted. She was already under the canopy of large oak and maple trees, where they couldn't be observed. As a precaution, she had secured several hay bales from the oxen barn and placed them strategically within the copse, so there could be no prying eyes from the road. John reached out his arms to her, and she ran to him. Together they walked hand in hand to the area behind the bales, where a carpet of pine needles was brushed clean of debris. They sat down together and stared at each other. Wordlessly, they drew together, for their first kiss. It was gentle, sweet, and filled with the tenderness of their longing. Soon their arms were around each other and his hands were upon her face.

"You know, Hannah, that I mean to marry you, if you'll have me," he said, between kisses.

"I think you'd best delay with those plans, John, as my family is in disrepute just now," she whispered.

"I care nothing for that, as I am sure Rebecca is innocent," he replied. "Will you marry me?" he drew back and looked into her face.

"Yes, yes I will," she laughed, feeling joy for the second time that spring. "I remember when you came the second time to buy barrels," she said, and "I knew that you were the man I wanted."

"Then we will figure out a way, we will be together," he answered, between kisses. After awhile she pulled away and said, "I must go now, but please come again as soon as possible!"

"What about this afternoon? Can you meet me again? Can you leave the house so soon?"

"I promise to do so, if I can. If you don't see me here by mid afternoon, you'll know something has arisen. Then, come back if you can get away from Springfield, in seven days time."

"I'll do it, my dearest," he smiled. But there would be no meeting that day, as the news filtered down that talk was mounting against Mary Esty.

In his home, on a windy April day, Judge Acorn pondered these accusations. He was sitting in front of his warm hearth when his wife came in from the cold. She was breathless with excitement.

"Mary Esty has been taken to the jail! She has been named as a worshipping of Satan!" The Judge put on a long face, but his heart smiled. This was what he had hoped for. The woman had brought out the worst in him; she must be a witch. She deserved punishment.

Mary was accused by Ann Putnam, daughter of the woman who'd accused her sister Rebecca. She was taken to be examined by Judge Hathorne, on April 22, 1692, and imprisoned thereafter.<sup>30</sup>

### Mary Esty in Jail

Mary awoke from a dream to find her legs twisted under her skirts. The little head of Doris Good was on her lap; the child's mother slept a few feet away. The cold, damp stone brushed against her neck as she re-arranged her limbs so as not to disturb the little girl. There was not enough room on the benches for all of the women to sleep off the stone floor. Each night they drew lots. Mary drew the floor. Suddenly the reality of another day in prison intruded on her dreamlike state. Yesterday had been almost unbearable. The rash under her ankle irons had turned bloody; even if she could reach it to scratch, her dirty and broken fingernails would have infected the rash and made it more deadly.

She could smell the cold April rain outside the jail; with its green draft, the scent of flowers trailed in. Lilacs and tulips grew on the lower hillside, beside the jail with its stunted bushes. Memories of former springtime made her want to cry. Mary got hold of herself quickly; better to give thanks for the beautiful scent on the April breeze, to maximize it, to make it linger. *God, give me the grace of your presence today. I lift up my day to you and ask you to bless it in every way.* Suddenly four year old Doris raised her head so quickly that the top of her skull hit the bottom of Mary's chin.

"What is it, dear girl?" asked Mary, rubbing her chin. "Did you have a nightmare? Your mother is right close by, Doris. You are alright."

"I'm so hungry and thirsty," cried the little girl.

"I know that. I am hungry too. Isaac, my husband, will bring food today. He said that he would. Nothing will stop him, not even this rain."

"But Mistress Esty, we have no one to bring us food," wailed Doris.

<sup>30</sup> McMillan, 282.

"Never you mind, little one, I will share mine with you. I would not let you go hungry, dear girl. My daughter, Hannah, will bring flour and eggs for Tiruba to make bread, and potatoes, onions and corn for the gruel she will boil. What would we do without Tiruba?" Mary stroked her head gently. "Now see if you can go back to sleep. It's very early in the morning. No one else is awake."

Mary looked over at the bench where her sister, Rebecca Nurse, slept soundly. *Praise God that she sleeps; dearest Lord, give her good dreams.* Rebecca had become dazed and forlorn; often she did not recognize Mary as she ministered to her needs. Mary would rub her back, massage her neck, hold her in a gentle embrace. Soon Rebecca would doze and then Mary could lay her gently back on the bench. Rebecca's children had brought pillows to shield her old body from the hard boards. They came as often as they could, to comfort their mother. The Nurse and Esty families were moving as if underwater. The Towne sisters had been accused of witchcraft by the crazy girls, even by those to whom they'd been most kind.

Mary could hear Tiruba moving about in the area off the middle room that served as the jail kitchen. Tiruba had been imprisoned, along with Sarah Osbourne, the elderly frail woman who lay near death, and Sarah Good. The three of them, the first group of sentenced witches, had come to the Boston jail together. Tiruba had confessed, but the others had not. She, Mary, had also refused to confess. She knew that Tiruba had made a false confession because the slave woman had confided in her that if she had not told her master, Samuel Parris, the minister of Salem Village, what he wanted to hear, he would have beaten her to death. She told Mary that Parris feared his job was at stake—the village wanted him gone—and that at her trial, he had never looked her in the eye. He took down her testimony in his crabbed handwriting, but never raised his head except to look at the afflicted girls in their fits.

"Maybe he knew that I had kept his wife alive while I nursed her, and little Betsy too," Tiruba had said ruefully. She and Mary talked as much as possible, in whispers, while the other women prisoners were asleep. Among their bonds was an interest in herbs, in healing, in cooking, in children, and in God. Mary was trying to teach her some psalms that she could repeat whenever her hope sank low. Tiruba and Mary both knew that the worst injustice done to them was the fact that the crazy young afflicted girls were able to dovetail their accusations, to make them march up, because they were allowed to talk together before, after and during the trials. The accusers could make their stories agree. The accused "witches" never had a chance.

Tiruba also knew the girls well; she had served in the Parris home for years, and she raised Betsy and Abigail, her cousin. Abigail was a troublemaker and tattle tale, she said. But all the girls were so bored. Tiruba would recall for them her youth in the islands, with the swimming and the sunshine bringing happy times even into the lives of slaves. That was why she had agreed to tell their fortunes, to lighten the bleak lives of the young Salem girls. She had learned to do this for her mistress in Barbados. She regretted entertaining these girls with fortunes; she also regretted participating in the witch cake made to help the afflicted ones. She reported to Mary that as soon as the dog had eaten the cake, she and Sarah Good and Sarah Osbourne had entered the home. Immediately the three of them had been accused of witchcraft; the cake was supposed to draw the witches. Then the girls began to writhe and scream on the floor, to twist their necks and torsos into impossible contortions, and to run around the floor barking like dogs.

Tiruba said that Ann Putnam senior, and her daughter Ann, as well as Abigail and Mercy Lewis, were the worst among the accusers because they seemed to seek power over everyone else. Sarah Vibber, too, was among the malicious ones.

Mary looked around the dim jail. She and the women were locked up in a small part of the jail that was well inside the structure. Outsiders would have to pass through two anterior rooms to reach the third part of the stone building. The few men that were imprisoned for witchcraft were locked away still further from the front door, in the darkest part of the building built closer to the edge of the hill. Below the hill ran a creek that served as a sewer of sorts; garbage and slops were dumped there. The stench of the refuse, human, animal and vegetable, added to the odor of misery within the jail itself. Only the front room had a fireplace and lanterns; the rest were unlit and unheated. The cold April morning, made colder by the rain, crept into Mary's bones. The arthritis in her legs and hands began to ache fiercely.

The jailer, Peter Wardle, entered with a lantern. He carried a jug of water and offered it to Mary. She gratefully took the cup from him and smiled up at him.

"Mistress Esty, how are you today?" He asked kindly. This woman was very polite, he had noticed; she never complained like the others. She spoke in a low, sweet voice to him, and inquired about his family. His own daughter was sick with the ague, and was not expected to recover. Mary had said prayers for her and taught her father new psalms to sing that would cheer up his little girl.

"Thank you so much for the blanket you gave to me last night," she said.

"I notice that you gave it to the dirty witch," he replied, pointing to the mother of Doris, who lay with the blanket wrapped around her body. Her mouth had fallen open to reveal her rotted teeth.

"Surely you would not have me deny a poor soul some warmth?" Mary asked slowly.

"No, mistress, but I can see that it will take another three blankets to get you through the cold spell that the rain brought in. I see the other two will be taking yours tonight, as this one is already fouled." He could smell the excrement beneath the limbs of Sarah Good.

"We cannot manage to move the slop basin underneath us, when it is almost filled, without spilling some of the waste," said Mary calmly. "If I had to choose between three more blankets, and three more slop basins, I would choose the basins. We really need them because we cannot control our stomachs. The upset to our systems has loosened our bowels. I do hope that you can understand. I would empty them myself to spare you the disagreeable task."

"I take you up on that, mistress. Tituba will be glad of the help, as I sometimes ask her to do that chore. I will get three more basins, three more blankets, and the key to your irons. You may empty the basins into the sluice beside the stream that runs behind the jail."

Mary gave thanks that she would soon be able to stretch her legs. Her muscles were stiff with the cold. Sarah Good opened her eyes as the jailer bent over Mary to unlock her leg irons.

"So, I see that your favorite, at least, is let go free," she growled. Mary looked at Sarah's filthy grey hair and leathery face. It was contorted with a scowl.

"No, Sarah, I am merely doing an errand: I am emptying the slops for us. We need the clean basins to use for the day."

"Humph, think I believe that," she muttered in reply. Dorcas awoke and looked with alarm upon Mary, who rose gently to her feet.

"I'll be back shortly, little one, Mary murmured. Dorcas grabbed Mary's skirts. "I promise I'll be right back."

Mary picked up the full basin and tried not to breathe as she carried it through the front rooms of the jail. The jailer opened the heavy door and she passed out, in front of him, into the drizzling grey daylight. She followed the path around the jail and down the hill to the sluice behind it; she noticed the stream was running high on its banks. What would happen to the prisoners if it overflowed its banks? She looked around the

structure and noticed that it was built on the highest point of the hillside. *Couldn't have any prisoners drown before they are hung.* After she emptied it into the creek, Mary tipped the basin over to drain on the wet grass. She stepped under a tree for a moment and looked up through its branches. *Good day, little creature, enjoy the fresh air.* Mary picked two daffodils and put one into her apron for Dorcas. She held the other out to the jailer as she re-entered the front room.

"Thank you for your kindness," she said, as she handed him the flower. "I brought another bud as well for the child, who needs some distraction," she added. "How is your daughter today? Is she still taking nourishment?"

"The child is still drinking the broth my poor wife prepares for her," the jailer answered sadly. "But as for solid food—no."

"See if she will take some fresh, hot milk," said Mary. "It will give her strength to eat. Then try a bit of bread and an egg. I will pray for her to eat, sure."

"Thank you, Mistress Esty. Give me your wet shawl to hang out over some chairs; I will bring it to you as soon as it's dry," he replied.

Mary did not ask him to replace the irons on her raw legs. The rash needed air and space away from the friction of the metal in order to heal. The jailer seemed to have forgotten them. *Now, if I can only keep Sarah Good from noticing that I'm not locked up. If she says something, I will try explaining to her that it's best for my rash to heal without the irons, for as long as possible.*

The morning passed slowly, and Dorcas cried bitterly in hunger. Mary noticed that the mold on the stone walls had variegated colors of browns and greens. Some layers were yellow, others blue. She tried to distract Dorcas by calling attention to the patterns she saw.

"Look, little one, see! The pictures are inside the lines of the moldy fungus. Tell me what you see!"

Mary drew her finger up into a circle, then followed the layers of crinkled ovals.

"I know, a rose!" cried the little girl.

"Now, close your eyes, and imagine how a rose smells." Dorcas put her head back and closed her eyes.

"I can smell the daffodil you gave me," she said hopefully. The daffodil lay upon her skirts.

"That's good, now try to imagine a rose smell. That means, picture it in your mind until it seems to bloom there." Mary knew that she'd have



to teach Dorcas the difference between the real and the imaginary. Maybe the daffodil would work for that.

"Now, Dorcas, keeping your eyes shut tight, imagine how a daffodil looks." Dorcas screwed up her eyes. She kept them shut.

"Now, there's a good little girl," Mary encouraged. "Dorcas, what you see in your mind is an imaginary flower. Now open your eyes." Dorcas obeyed.

"Now see the real flower in your lap?" Dorcas looked down at it.

"That's a REAL flower, Mistress Esty. And this one in my head," she closed her eyes, is an IMAGINARY flower. Mary realized that the little girl was quite smart, despite her lack of upbringing.

"Yes, dear child. And you are more gifted than many of the older girls, who cannot tell the difference between the real and the imaginary."

Rebecca awoke and called for Mary. *Good that she remembers I am here to help her.* Mary stepped over the sleeping forms in front of the benches and sat down carefully upon the edge of the bench.

"Dearest sister, God bless you. Good morning," Mary said kindly. She noticed that Rebecca's arms bore the bruises of poor nutrition and scrapes from the rough wood. Momentarily she was overtaken with hatred for the cruel girls who had accused her beloved sister of witchcraft, a thing so outrageous that Salem still rocked with shock over it. Rebecca's trial had gone badly because she couldn't hear what the interrogator asked her, due to her deafness. She misunderstood and gave a wrong answer. *How horrifying that those girls accuse an old, pious woman, in order to bring attention and power to themselves! The devil truly has them by the hair, and they will drag us all to death before they stop, curse them! May they live with the outcome of their evil deeds for all eternity.* Mary frowned as she turned over Rebecca's old and frail wrists.

Rebecca smiled slowly at Mary. "Do you think we'll have visitors today?" she asked.

At that moment, Isaac and Hannah, Mary's daughter, walked into the room. Hannah rushed to hug her, and Isaac kissed her cheek. Mary patted him on the cheek by way of greeting.

"Good day, mother; we brought you clean clothes and food," Hannah smiled. "Good day, dear Aunt Rebecca. We brought you food as well." She turned aside to Isaac. Let father hold up this sheet and you can change clothing in the corner," she pointed. Wardle, the jailer, nodded as she spoke. Mary went behind the temporary screen. Hannah helped her mother remove the soiled skirts, shirts and underclothing.

"It's a blessing I no longer have the monthly bleeding," Mary smiled at her daughter. She stepped out of the pile of dirty clothing, which Hannah

scooped up quickly. Hannah opened a jar of water and poured some onto a rag.

"Turn around, Mother, hold up your hair, and I'll do your neck. When she finished, Hannah said, "Now I'll step out so that you can wash your privates." The girl walked out from the corner and took a turn helping her father hold up the screen. When Mary finished, she said, "I'm done." Once inside the sheet again, Hannah patted her mother's arm.

Then Hannah grasped the clean clothing from the jailer and helped Mary to pull up the pantaloons. Her mother exclaimed in pleasure, "These are new, dear child! Did you sew them?" "No, your daughter in law made them for you. I added the lace to them." Hannah applied powder to Mary's back and underarms, and pulled the white shift over her head. The clean smell of the garments was such a welcome relief that her eyes welled up. Hannah noticed the tears in her mother's eyes.

"What is it, mother? Are they cruel to you here?"

"Oh no, dear, not at all. I'm just overcome at the blessings my family brings to me in love. Dorcas has no one to help her, and Goody Good is despised by the whole village. Is there enough food for them too?" Hannah nodded, then called to her father, "We're finished."

Isaac began to fold up the sheet he'd been holding up. Then he unpacked the food, with Hannah's help. They had brought savory deer meat slowly cooked in an onion broth, brown bread, beans with salt pork, cheese, and wine. Hannah turned, with an armful of foodstuff, and walked to the kitchen area with flour, eggs, yeast and cider to Tiruba, who had been the first accused. She was arrested after she confessed during the vicious near-fatal beating by Rev. Parris, after she was the first to walk into the home where the witchcake lay. It was a special cake made with dog's urine, and supposedly drew the witches to it. Tiruba smiled at Hannah and gratefully took the foodstuff.

Hannah and Mary spread out the feast for all of them. Hannah had been on the long journey to the Ipswich jail since early morn. After the meal, Isaac left to do business in the township, and Hannah leaned up against her mother to rest. Mary inhaled the scent of her clean hair. She reflected that it smelled like sunshine. She held out her daughter's slim hands and caressed their fingers. They did not need to talk of their bond, and the longing their absence had brought to them.

Mary asked Tiruba to come over to her side of the jail room, where Hannah had put the remaining food on a bench.

"Tiruba, see these potatoes?" Mary asked, as she unwrapped the brown globes. "Take them and peel them, then cut them into layers,

about so thick" Mary placed her thumb and forefinger about a quarter of an inch apart. "Then take these onions," Mary picked up the fat orange-brown spheres, "and slice them even thinner." Mary smiled at the black slave woman, whose eyes lit up as she smiled back.

"Then you will take a cooking pot, and make one layer of onions and potatoes, and then sprinkle this flour—about like half of your palm—with some salt, on top of your double layer. Then do the same thing three or four times, but leave enough room at the top for the milk. Take this jar of milk," she scooped up the milk from the barrel that Isaac had brought, "and pour it over the top." Hannah nodded.

"Then you will put the crock over the fire for an hour, and be sure to replace the wood under the crock after thirty minutes, to keep the crock even." Hannah noticed that Tiruba seemed a little concerned.

"Mistress, I have nothing to count on an hour, as I cannot go outside to see the sunshine and shadows."

"Never mind," Hannah interrupted. "Mother can tell you when an hour is up. No one can keep up with the passage of time the way she can. She always knows what time it is." Hannah hugged her mother.

Mary smiled at the younger women. "I am so glad that Tiruba is here with me," she said. "She is teaching me so much about the islands, and I am teaching her more about herbs and remedies than she already knows. She is a gifted student and a fine healer. We are fortunate to have her in the colony." Tiruba grasped Mary's hand. It was so long since anyone had praised her, and she cherished the compliment.

Just then Isaac came into the room where the women were talking.

"Tiruba, I have good news. Your husband, John Indian, is very well, and he was happy to hear that you are well too," Isaac said.

"Thanks be to God," said Tiruba. This is a good day. You bring me good news about my husband, and your wife teaches me a new dish to prepare for the people here. I appreciate the potatoes, onion, flour, milk and everything else you have done for us. Also, I can prepare the in the jail kitchen fireplace, and put it within before I light the wood that you brought. We can use the heat as well, on this cold spring day.

Isaac had taken advantage of the lull in the rainy weather. He'd gone out to the merchants to secure materials for his barrel business, and had been gone a few hours. Mary put her arms around him. He held her for a long time. He patted her hair and spoke soothing words that only she could hear.

Hannah spoke quietly to her mother as she embraced her before leaving. "I placed more root vegetables in the blankets that we brought to you. We will be back Tuesday week."

"Praise God for you, dear daughter. Without your visits I'd be hungry, and the Goods as well. If you could find my extra clothing, perhaps we could get Sarah Good to change some of hers too? But you'd have to discard what she takes off. Also, bring another dress for Tiruba. She needs a change of clothing. She works very hard. Hannah, how can you and your father spare so much time from your chores on the farm?"

"One of my older brothers will come, and the men will take turns. Since I'm not yet married, I can cook and clean while you're here, and prepare the meals as well. It's the least I can do, coming twice each week, to see my beloved mother. I do miss you so, at home!" Mary kissed her gently.

## Hannah at Home in Topsfield

Last year's flax was deeply rooted and hard to remove from the soil, but it was time to start a new crop. Hannah had made clothing to surprise her mother. She'd spun their sheep wool herself into yarn and woven the yarn into a fine cloth. The beige color would work well as a skirt below the apron. Hannah found lace to border the cap she'd made for Dorcas. *The child's ears are dirty; maybe she's never washed them. Better make this a very small lace border.* As Hannah rose upright to straighten her back, she heard a horse beyond the corn patch her father and brothers had sown last week. She hoped it was John Pyncheon. He dismounted and turned to watch her in the sunny May morning. She forced herself to walk, in a stately manner, down the violet bordered path towards him. He smiled and asked if she'd like to get fresh water from the river.

"Yes," she replied, "you've read my mind. I have mother's clothing to wash for her. Just let me get the soap and buckets from the house." He started towards the river ahead of her. The climbing roses that Mary had planted were just beginning to bud on the fencepost. Hannah turned and went to the house. She was glad that Isaac and the boys had gone to the village. Hannah gathered the soiled laundry, the soap made from lard, and the buckets. She hurried out the door.

"Dearest John," she called softly, as she caught up with him. He took the buckets from her and placed them on the ground. The dock was empty. The lilac bushes scented the sunlit air, and after they sat down,

she closed her eyes as he kissed her. Cardinals and goldfinch flew up to the trees at the river's edge. The warm air sparkled on the water, and they could see tree leaves on the sandy river bottom. Pebbles glistened beneath the surface. Young maple leaf buds were opening wide in the spring day; she saw apple blossoms in the branches beyond the river on the next bank.

"How is your mother?" asked John.

"Not well, I fear. She puts on a brave face, but the jail is filled with illness. I fear that she will catch tuberculosis or pneumonia. If the sailors bring malaria back with them again from the tropics, the women will not have a chance. The jailer's daughter already has the ague." John looked up at Hannah.

"I can bring an anodyne for the child; we ordered herbs last fall and the shipment has come in at Salem port. I'm headed there today. I can stop by tonight with it; you will be through with your chores by then?"

"Yes, I plan to go tomorrow. It will be such a blessing to take the medicine for the little one. The child is jailed with her mother, Sarah Good, and she may catch it from the jailer's daughter. I just hope we'll be in time."

"Let me water my horse and be off. I'll return shortly after the sunset and wait in the woods for you, in the usual spot." John turned to go; the broad sunlight lit up his hair. He looked like an angel to Hannah; she saw him outlined in light as he took one bucket of water for the steed, then rode away. The violets at her feet were sweet reminders of the May month; soon lily of the valley would raise its pure bells above the green grass. Hannah could not help but give thanks for John Pyncheon. She was at peace in his arms as nowhere else.

## May 22, 1692

A blessed day arrived in late May, when Mary was released. She did not know that she would be re-imprisoned soon. The afflicted girls, would perform violent fits to convince magistrates that they would surely die, due to Mary's spectral attacks upon them. A few days of liberty were all she had.

Her husband Isaac tenderly embraced her as they entered the front door of their home. Hannah had been hard at work cleaning and cooking to welcome her mother. Mary's first request surprised them.

"I want to swim in the crystal clear pond, in the sunlight, to wash away the jail's dirt," she announced with a smile.

"Of course, mother, Father will go with you to keep watch so as to deter any other bathers," Hannah answered, disregarding her father's frown. Hannah looked up at him with beseeching eyes, a look her father never could resist.

"All right, goodwife, you may prepare to go now. I have some business in the shop this afternoon. Will the water be warm enough?" he asked. Mary hugged him for a few moments.

"I'll be right down. Let me change these skirts and put on something easily removed."

The woods rang with robin chirps, and the dogwood blossoms bordered the entrance to the pond. Mary slipped off her clothing at the water's edge and stepped into the clear pond. It was so pure that she could see the leaves from last fall that had drifted down from the maple and oak trees. She lowered herself into the cold water and took a deep breath of fresh air. She looked up at the sun dappled branches above her and inhaled the smell of damp earth. She felt that her happiness was complete. Mary had learned to live each day as if it were her last. She observed the peaceful pond life, with waterlilies and freshwater fish gliding a few feet from her luminescent limbs. She splashed around, then placed her face underwater. Her toes looked yellow in the sunlit liquid. When she lifted her head, she heard Isaac call to her.

"Come out, Mary, a cart is coming down the road to the pond," he entreated.

"Mary took one last look to embed the memory of this moment in her mind. She knew that she would need to return to it, to refresh herself. She took Isaac's arm, carefully climbed onto the bank, quickly dried and dressed, and resumed her place by her husband's side.

"You look like a mermaid, sure," he smiled at her dripping hair. They held hands as they walked back to their home. There she dried her hair and sorted through all of the shifts, aprons and blouses that Hannah had carefully washed for her. They looked like old friends to Mary. When she came down the stairs, Hannah had the table all set for dinner. Mary enjoyed the wild turkey that she'd prepared as well as the Johnny cake and cider. She complimented her daughter on her skill with cooking and housekeeping.

"Father and I didn't think you'd want company tonight. We asked them to come for the mid day meal tomorrow. All the women will bring dishes; I won't be cooking anything," she added, in response to Mary's lifted eyebrows.

In the flower scented darkness of their bedroom that night, Isaac and Mary celebrated their love for one another. Mary knew she would never forget his tenderness. She slept deeply, with his arms around her, until morning light.

Later that day, as Mary's friends gathered to wish her welcome, across the village in Ann Putnam's bedroom, Mercy Lewis stared at Abigail Williams, Ann Putnam, and Betty Parris. Mercy was so happy to be included now in the inner circle of girls. She was becoming a leader among them. Because she was older, she knew that her presence lent credence to their accusations. Thomas Putnam had not tried to assault Mercy since the hearings began. The fear in him was too great, and Mercy gave thanks for that. *Maybe he thinks his wife will accuse him also, if she finds out about his sexual demands upon me.* Mercy knew that the mimic strategy at the first examination of Mary Esty was working well. The girls were emboldened to copy every move of her hands, eyes, torso; their performance was convincing.

"I saw you twist your mouth when Mistress Esty pursed her lips," said Ann with approval. "Did you really feel her spectral spirit attacking you?"

"Of course, I felt her pull my head back, and try to shove a stick in my mouth, so I screamed out," said Mercy, recalling her vision of Ann's father the last time he forced oral sex upon her. It had come into her mind just as Judge Hathorne began the questioning of Mary Esty.

"When Judge Hathorne asked you twice, if you were sure that it was her, you seemed to waver a bit," said Mercy accusingly. Hathorne was unsure about the girls' identification of Mary, so he'd asked twice. It was Ann Putnam who twice identified her. It had been her mother, elder Ann Putnam, who had testified against Mary's sister, Rebecca Nurse.<sup>31</sup>

"No," Ann replied. "I wasn't wavering. I was just afraid of what her spectral spirit would do to me, and I wanted to avoid the punishment." Mercy looked at her skeptically. *If you knew the punishment your own father inflicts upon me and that I must bear upon threat of death.*

"Next time, you must speak more clearly and firmly, and say that the spectral spirit has attacked you viciously. You must do better at demonstrating the attack. You must agree with what I say, and repeat it before the judge, just as you copy the actions of the person on the stand." Mercy looked fiercely around her. The daughter of Goodwife Putnam, Ann had been brought up with fear of the demon. She shuddered, and Betty

<sup>31</sup> McMillan, 288.

gasped. Ann and Betty both looked apprehensively at Mercy. "Now, repeat what I just said," she demanded.

"We must agree with what you say, and repeat it before the judge," they wavered together.

"We must sacrifice our own bodies if we are to rid this village of the demon," replied Mercy. Out of the bedroom window, she saw Rev. Parris coming up the walk. "Betty, here is your father, come to fetch you and Abigail." She looked down upon the new apron given her by Ann Putnam after the examination. She'd asked for a weskit to go with the white apron; Ann had promised to dye the material with onion skins and let her sew it. She did not tell Abigail and Betty, nor Ann either, that Rev. Parris had looked at her body overlong at the last Sabbath meeting before the examination of Mary Esty. In fact, he had stared at her breast, grown to fullness in the last year. Her old apron, too small, strained against her maturing breast. This look had been given her in the doorway of the meetinghouse, when no one else was present. Recognizing the lust behind it, she had spoken sharply upon her exit. The new power of her position as a leader of the afflicted girls, gave her the strength.

"Satan is appearing in the most surprising homes of the virtuous," she had fairly shouted at him. He nodded and looked away. She did not want him to mess up her new popularity and power in the village. She did not need the sexual interest of the minister in addition to that of her own relative, Thomas Putnam. While their approval might be of help to her, their lust would only hurt her.

The mother, Ann Putnam, bounded up the stairs and burst into the room. "Rev. Parris reports that Mistress Esty has been freed from prison!" she shouted.

Immediately, Mercy fell on the floor and began to writhe and to scream.

"Help me, help me!" she called out. Mercy began to go into her own world, the world of violence from Thomas Putnam and from her memories of the massacre. She rolled her eyes back and began to chew on her tongue.

"Stop showing that stick in my mouth!" she yelled, biting herself. "Stop holding that knife above my head!" The blood began to run from her bitten lips. "You are killing me! I cannot breathe!"

Rev. Parris came up the stairs and stopped at the doorway in horror.

"What's going on here?" he demanded.

"She's being attacked by the spectral spirit of Mary Esty," Goodwife Putnam shouted.



Parris looked at the ugly apparition and winced. Even the breasts straining at her apron could not appeal to him now. "We must call Judge Hathorne to witness this," he called out as he left the room. "Take her to the front room on the first floor."

Goodwife Putnam raced ahead of him down the stairs to get her husband. As he carried the jerking girl down the stairs, he whispered to her, "Don't stop now, Mercy. Get that devil worshipping back into prison so she'll stop attacking you!"

## Death of Rebecca

Rebecca was at first acquitted, but the jury was sent back by one man, to reconsider. She could not hear the question put to her about why she said, of Mary Warren, who made a false confession and became an accuser, "Why do you bring her here? She was one of us." Her aged deafness was her downfall.

On July 19, 1692, the Esky house was lighted with whale oil lanterns, as it was still night. Isaac refreshed the lamps with whale oil after he had knelt at his bedside, the big bed he'd shared with Mary, to say his morning prayers. But he couldn't focus his mind, so opaque it was with pain.

Isaac was heartbroken over the fact of Rebecca's impending hanging. He had promised to tell everything to Mary, although why she had asked him to do this, he couldn't say. He was not in the habit of relating things that might upset her; maybe that was why she especially asked him. She may have thought he could tell her the facts without embellishment.

The morning of the hanging was rainy and cold.

The wind was blowing; Gallows Hill looked especially forbidding. Isaac hitched up his team and bundled his family into it, those who spent nights with him, Hannah and his sons. It took some three wagons to take all the rest of them, including the others and the grandchildren. Nobody had slept much the night before; the storm coming in from off the ocean had kept them all awake, that and their own misgivings. Rebecca's grown sons arrived with their families, so the Towne sisters and their kinfolk were well represented at Gallows Hill.

The men greeted each other silently, with handshakes and arms extended. The women hugged each other and urged strength to get through the awful ordeal. They brushed the rain from their eyes and

cheeks, and offered cold lips to kiss one another. The soaking rain was adding terrible physical discomfort to the catastrophe.

Rebecca, who was deaf and very weak, had to be carried off the cart that brought her and the other "witches" from the jail. Sarah Good could be seen to hit and scratch the jailer as she was lifted off.

Rebecca seemed dazed and uncertain of what was happening. Her children embraced her and comforted her with words about Heaven, the Holy Spirit and Christ awaiting her. They told her that her own mother, Joanna, would greet her in Heaven. They emphasized the idea of homecoming and not one told her not to be afraid. However, all were worried that, because she didn't seem to understand what was happening, that she might panic. She did not deserve to be afraid, since she had lived a holy life.

After the family had said their goodbyes, the "witches" were helped to ascend the steps to the carts which would take them to death. Rebecca stumbled and the executioner reached his arm around her to steady her. Then, Rebecca stood quietly as the hood was placed over her head, and the rope positioned around her neck. Isaac gasped when Sarah Good pushed the executioner with her knees, as her hands and legs were bound. The man slipped but did not fall. Isaac was glad that he did not hit Sarah. He thought of Mary, waiting in the jail, who probably had Sarah Good's little daughter Dorcas upon her lap at that very moment. Who would take care of the little girl if Mary, too, were hung?

Finally the moment came when the order was given to move the carts beneath the "witches." It was a death by slow strangulation, as there was no "drop." The carts merely left the bodies dangling.<sup>32</sup> As they swung in the rain, their groans were muffled by the wind which blew their bodies back and forth. When the bodies were cut down and dropped to the ground, they were placed into the cart and moved to an open pit. Rebecca's body was on top of the others. The men noted this, as they planned to return later for it, to give her a proper burial. Isaac alone was glad of the rain for it hid his tears.

Mary listened to Hannah's description of the hanging very carefully. Knowledge of doom comes slowly to the human mind. Mary had first known that the accused witches could die, all of them, when she heard of the death of Bridget Bishop, the first "witch" to be executed. When Bishop was hanged at Gallows Hill on June 8, Mary was horrified, even stunned. Yet she continued to pray that the process would stop. She had seized upon Cotton

<sup>32</sup> McMillan, 479.

Mather's letter as a sign that God heard her prayers. Mather had urged the trials to discount spectral evidence. Mary knew that spectral evidence played into the hands of the accusers. But a further step in her mind was made, when she understood the dreadful implications of the death of her sister Rebecca, and the four other accused women.

On that day, July 19, 1692, Mary Estry knew for certain that she too would die. She knew she had little time to live. From the horror of the realization that people did want to die, to take her life and her breath from her, to throw her body into a hole in unconsecrated ground, she was cast into despair.

### Mary Seeks Her Purpose

Such events seemed impossible in a Christian community. She was innocent, and so, she thought, were most of the others. While she, Mary Estry, did indeed believe in the existence of the devil, and of witches as his means to enter the Puritan village, she had not been convinced that any of them were guilty. After all, she had served time in prison with them. Even the false "confessors" had been forced into that position by the demands of the court, spurred on by the afflicted girls. The girls were the real culprits. They spoke together and planned their stories, to work out the details, the better to reinforce one another. Mercy Lewis, in particular she knew, hated her and wanted her to die. Mary had thought a great deal about this girl.

Her earnest prayers changed. She had been beseeching God to stop the process of the witch trials. Now she began to question, if she too were doomed to die, what was her particular purpose in this process?

Mary decided that she must pray for Mercy Lewis. But how to pray for one whose insanity would be responsible for sending her to the gallows? Her brain refused to move past the girl's name itself. She would then picture Mercy's face at the examination, in the contortions of her self-inflicted tortures.

But, more important, how could she, an elderly woman, make the most of the time remaining to her? How could she make it meaningful, in this fight against Satan's evil? What could she do, to put on the helmet of salvation? How could she use Scripture, the sword of the spirit, in this battle? Mary thought long and hard about this last point. Scripture was the sword of the spirit, the legacy of the disciples and the prophets. Scripture: the very word itself meant something written down. What could she

write that would live past her own death, to contribute to the side of God, the goodness of God, against the Satanic evil that had overtaken Salem?

Why was she Mary Estry, going to die for her faith in God, in a cruel and ironic reversal of the true circumstances? She knew that her refusal, to plead guilty to the worship of the Enemy, was itself her death warrant. Her husband Isaac had asked her to plead guilty for the sake of their children if not for him, in order to live. But she had seen clearly that her confession would lead directly to the imprisonment and torture of her daughters, and especially of Hannah. The prevailing belief that witches spawned witches, through the line of the mother, would point its finger at her daughters. They would not escape this fate if she pleaded guilty. She could only hope, as she told Isaac, that the process would end before all the females and extended families of the original Towne sisters were dead. But, as for her own eternal life, she could not jeopardize it for the sake of a few more years on earth.

What then, was God's will for her purpose in this process? What was she supposed to do? She knew she was supposed to do something. But what?

This became an hourly question in her mind.

She had tried to help her older sister through the ordeal with non-stop prayers during the days before and after June 29-30. Since that time, and especially after July 19, Mary felt disoriented, as though she inhabited a different atmosphere, not the familiar foul air of the prison. When people addressed her, she was unable to answer right away. What saved her was the responsibility she felt for Dorcas, the now orphaned daughter of Sarah Good, who was hanged along with Rebecca Nurse, Susannah Martin, Elizabeth Howe, and Sarah Wildes at Gallows Hill. During the days before, during and after, Dorcas had clung to her, as indeed the mother she had never had. Mary tried to divert Dorcas, to help her to sleep, by telling stories about the timid birds that one rarely saw in the colony.

"Just about now, Dorcas, the birds of the forest are flying back to their nests in the pine trees and the oak trees. Do you know the difference?"

"One of them has needles and the other has leaves."

"Yes, the oak has leaves. Some of the leaves look like mittens that children wear in winter."

"I never had any," Dorcas said sadly, "I did see them on the other children. My hands were always turning blue with cold. Mother would put my hands under her arms when we slept in the haystack."

"Did you hear any birds when you were sleeping in the haystacks?"

"No—mostly we slept in barns if we could get into them. They were warmer. But we did hear the mother cats with their kittens, and we did hear the mice—one ran over my face when I turned over in the night. Its little feet tickled me." Mary hugged Dorcas and tweaked her nose.

"Try to picture the forest outside at night now—the wilder birds, not the robins that nest in the apple trees—are flying home to the pine groves. Think of the wood-thrush, the scarlet tanager, and the whippoorwill. Those we don't see so often. They are flying to the pine boughs, carefully stepping over the needles and the pitch, and picking up their thin legs to clear the rise into the nest. Now see the white throated sparrow on the striped maple branch. The last rays of the sun are warm on his feathers. His friend, the slate colored junco, has just come to roost in the hemlock tree next to him. His tummy is full of the insects that he ate for supper. Is your tummy full, Dorcas? What did you have for supper?"

"You know, you know," said Dorcas, sleepily burrowing her head into Mary's lap. "Your daughter Hannah brought us some deer meat that she stewed with potatoes. I like her cooking, Mary. She is a good cook."

"And she also brought us crisp oatcake and elderberry wine. Did you like the oatcake?" But Dorcas had fallen asleep. Mary shifted the torso of the little girl to her side. She wanted to hear Tituba when she came to sleep, and she needed to hold the dark hands in her own. She was dreading the visions that might haunt her, for she had asked detailed questions about the hanging from her daughter. Isaac had refused to speak, simply shaking his head, while the tears fell from his eyes as he looked upon his doomed wife. Isaac knew in his heart before any of them, that Mary would hang also. He cried, not so covertly before his women, though he tried to hide his tears from his sons.

Tituba crept softly into the warmth of the late summer evening in the jail. She stopped before Mary's reclining form and sat down on the stone floor beside her. Without a word, she took Mary's hand in her own and held it tightly.

Mary's heart ached and she did not know the groans had escaped her throat. Tituba raised her up from her prone position on the plank, and put her arms around her. Tituba sat down on the plank and held Mary in her arms. The coppery smell of her chocolate skin reassured Mary, who put her head down upon the wide shoulders that had held the Parris children and the sick wife of the man who'd condemned her also.

"Mistress, God will save our souls. Your sister is safe in the arms of Jesus. She is no longer suffering. We must be strong to welcome Christ into our hearts also."

"Bless you, Tituba. You are a comfort to me. Would you say the psalm to me that I taught you? That would soothe me to sleep." At the sound of her whispers, little Dorcas sat up and then was folded into their loving arms.

The next morning, as she was rising to consciousness, Mary had the experience of a heavy body falling horizontally across her shoulders. She was being held in a tight embrace by the arms of this person, who smelled dreadfully. In the nightmare, Mary bit the arms that held her, which suddenly released her. As she did so, she began to gag, for she had bitten flesh covered with excrement. Mary spat forcefully as she awoke. Little Dorcas sat bolt upright beside her, and put out her small hand to Mary's face.

"Wake up, wake up Mistress Mary! You are having a nightmare," cried the child.

"Yes, yes, I am awake now, dear girl," Mary murmured, stretching out her legs. Mary could not understand the meaning of the nightmare until she thought of the excrement. The taste had been so strong in the dream. Suddenly she recalled the disgusting habit of Sarah Good, now dead. The woman would wipe her bottom off with her hands and then scrape her hands onto her skirts. Mary had been appalled by her bestiality. She wondered how she could ever have helped and protected her after the rape. Sarah Good lost all dignity after she'd been thrown out of the community for debt. She had dragged her own daughter through the most humiliating scenes with the villagers. Mary disliked the revolting habits of the woman, but she despised her cruelty to her own child.

At the beginning of their jail time together, Dorcas would whine and cry, and hold her hands out to her mother. Sarah Good would strike her in the face, and leave bruises on the small cheek, tossing her in circles like a seagull blown in the wind. Once she hit her so hard that the little girl's nose began to bleed. Mary and Tituba had intervened, to the screaming curses of the filthy woman. After that, Dorcas had left her mother alone. She had crept closer to Mary, and tried to make herself invisible to her mother's eyes. Never did Sarah Good ask how Dorcas felt, whether she was hungry or cold, if she needed help. Indeed, she seemed to forget her altogether. Mary thought this was probably a blessing.

Now Mary felt the anger rising again, as she pictured the scene that morning. The hangman had come with his helpers to fetch Rebecca, Susanna Martin, Sarah Wildes, Sarah Good, and Elizabeth Howe. Sarah Good had given no thought to the effect she would have upon her daughter when she scratched the man, as he reached for her, so badly that the blood ran down his cheek.

"Oh, so the devil is right in yer today, old witch?" he exclaimed, as he stared at the blood on his hand. "Take that, ye devil's concubine," said the hangman, as he struck her on the head. She fell to the floor. Dorcas ran to her mother's prone body.

"Mother, Mother, are you dead?" screamed the little one.

"She an't dead yet, but she'll be in hell before the day is over," sneered the hangman. Mary gave him an icy look as she shook her head.

"Think of the child; you have children of your own," she warned.

"This lit'l'un will have inherited her mother's witchcraft," replied the hangman roughly, as he dragged Sarah Good out by the feet. Her head bumped on the threshold, and she came to consciousness swearing and screaming. That was the last vision little Dorcas would have of her mother. Later in her life the child would have mental problems, in part because of her mother's neglect, in part because of the time she would spend in solitary confinement after the other "witches" were gone.

Mary knew that she would have to overcome her anger at the dead woman, bad though she was to her child. She turned to Dorcas and spoke gently to her.

"Dorcas, I want you to tell me whenever you think of your mother. This is what we will say of her when the memory of her comes to mind. *Blessed mother, rest in peace.* Can you say that for me now?"

Dorcas murmured the phrase. Then she hid her face in Mary's shoulder.

"It has a nice, soothing sound, doesn't it?" Mary said, as she stroked Dorcas' hair. "It sounds like the end of our prayers each night. We can think of your mother, and also the mother of Our Lord. Think of your mother sitting beside our Heavenly Mother, looking up at her radiant face. Finally your mother has found peace, little one."

"You don't think she is in Hell, like the hangman said?"

"Judgment Day hasn't come to us yet, dear child. No one knows for sure. But I do know that if we pray for her peace, it will help. And such prayers will help us too." Dorcas took Mary's hand and kissed it.

### Isaac at home

After darkness fell that night, Isaac could not sleep. He left his bed, lit the lantern, went downstairs and then outside into the cold, windy aftermath of a Topsfield storm. The rain that had fallen earlier had formed puddles in the drive, and the droplets flung into his face from the

weaving oak branches. Isaac could not dispel the image of Rebecca swinging on the end of the rope. He tried to replace this memory with the softer one of the body, now dressed in her best, after her body was retrieved from the top of the pit where it was thrown. After they'd driven her home by oxcart in the dark night, they had laid her coffin gently into the grave that the Towne, Esty and Nurse men had dug for her. The prayers that Hannah added to those of Rebecca's family were especially comforting to Isaac. He tried to recall them exactly. *Angels take thee to thy rest. Sweet Rebecca, God protect thy loving soul. Strength of God surround thee until the promised day of the Second Coming of Christ.* Hannah had placed the last flowers upon her aunt's breast, daisies and roses and larkspur, before the coffin was closed, and the dirt was carefully placed upon its cover. Although the process took longer, it made less noise than the usual shovels of earth landing forcefully upon the wood. Isaac thought ruefully about the secrecy of this second burial, so consistent with theological principles, when the death of the deceased, so contrary to those principles, had occurred in broad daylight. The madness of the witch hunt was forcefully driven in to him with this contrast. Night had become day, and day the darkest night. The group had turned upon its weakest victims and flaunted its ghastly power to kill.

Isaac looked up at the gaunt oaks waving their branches and watched a mist rising from the pond near the property. He walked down the gloomy lane through the mud and darkness. Suddenly the face of Judge Acorn loomed up through his memory. The man had the gall, yesterday, to smile through the ceremony of the hanging. His wife had smiled too. He realized, in reviewing the scene of the smiling couple, that the woman was wearing a raspberry weskit over her navy skirt and white blouse, as she stood under the rain-cover that her husband held above them both. Raspberry to a hanging! Most likely, the Acorns had not planned to come to the ceremony. Probably they were indeed at the home of some neighbor enjoying wine or beer, and decided to stop by on their way home. Surely Mistress Acorn would have better propriety than to wear a bright color to flaunt before the grieving family. Her costume bespoke of her indifference to their suffering. But no, it would be in character for the hypocrites to pretend compassion at the same time that they projected scorn.

Isaac walked slowly back to the Esty property. The light in the house, coming from the lantern in the front room window, streamed across the road, and threw into shadow a dark evergreen tree with graves of their dead infants beneath it. Will I ever, ever get through this? He



wondered. Standing in the doorway he saw his son Joshua. The young man walked out into the darkness to greet his father. With arms around each other's shoulders, they entered the home.

On her way home from her meeting with John Pyncheon, Hannah saw some black kittens playing in the road. She wondered if the black cat that her mother found, on the doorstep in January, had sired those kittens. She knew that the black cat was a male. Maybe the mother cat was already pregnant with babies when he died? Hannah thought about her love-making with John Pyncheon. They had let nature take its course, since they were clearly meant for each other. Puritans were frequently pregnant when they married, and it was not unusual even for a young woman of good reputation to be with child. Yet she had not expected to conceive so quickly. However, like her mother, Hannah had faith in God and He knew what He was doing. To distract herself from the worry about her mother in jail, she began to write letters in her mind to her unborn child. *A cold fog. These mornings those who walk in grass are thoroughly wetted above to the middle. All the earth is dripping wet. I am surprised to feel how warm are the drops of water, in contrast to the cold air. The dewy cobwebs are very thick this morning, like little napkins of fairies spread on the grass.*<sup>33</sup> Hannah wondered whether the baby was a girl or a boy. She continued her letter. *Where my path crosses the brook in the meadow there is a singularly sweet scent in the heavy air... where the brakes grow—the fragrance of the earth, as if the dew were a distillation of the essences of Nature.* Last year's leaves crowded the forest floor beneath the blossoms; Hannah longed to tell her mother of the contrast between the brown, dead withered rolls and the fragile, green, bending stems of the pink bell flowers.

In the jail, the women were alarmed. They were subject to a body search for 'witches teats,' the place where their familiars gave suck. The woman sent to do the examination exclaimed at the little tag of flesh she found on Mary's shoulder blade.<sup>34</sup>

"See! I knew it! And in a place that the whole court can witness!" The woman cried. "I can order her to unbutton her blouse at the trial, and to lower her collar, and the judges themselves can see it!"

"Not a teat at all," grumbled Tiuba next to Mary, "but a birthmark. Many people have those brown marks that grow bigger as they age." But the magistrate's wife had already left the jail. "Never you mind, Mistress Mary. That little birthmark don't mean nothing."

<sup>33</sup> Thoreau, entry of June 17, 1854 *In Wilderness is the Preservation of the World*, ed. Eliot Porter. Ballantine, 1974.

<sup>34</sup> McMillan, 472-3

When Tiuba repeated this episode to Hannah, as they worked together in the jail kitchen a day later, Hannah straightened up suddenly and looked fixedly at the black woman.

"What's wrong, Missy? I told your Momma that brown tag weren't nothing!"

"No, it's not you I'm thinking of. It's my cousin, young Rebecca Towne. She's been spreading lies about mother, lies that involve the witches' teat. You know she is my cousin as she was born to my uncle and his wife. She suffered from 'fits' like aunt Rebecca; she said the wildest things when she was crossed. She liked a fellow who preferred me; she tried to frighten him so that he would not pursue me. That was several years ago. Lately she's been talking about mother and Aunt Rebecca in Ingersoll's Inn. I know she claims that mother attacked her and tortured her." Hannah sat down suddenly. The danger coming from within the family itself was too much for her. Tiuba stood with her hands on Hannah's shoulders.

"We will get through this, Miss Hannah. Your mother is the strongest of all of us. You have inherited her strength and her goodness. You will need both to fight the devil in Salem. Be careful who you talk to: don't tell anyone that you are worried about your cousin. She will get her own reward. Keep your name off the lips of the Villagers. You know they will all say anything to divert the attention of the court away from them, cowards that they be."

Hannah walked quietly out of the jail kitchen and crossed the stone floor to her other, who was sitting against the wall with her eyes closed. She sat down on the wooden bench next to her, and took her mother's hand in her own. But Mary did not respond. She did not open her eyes and she did not squeeze the warm fingers of her beautiful daughter.

After Rebecca's death, Mary Esty and her sister Sarah Cloyse spent part of the remaining summer manacled and in the Boston prison. The manacles tore at their tender skin which, due to the heat and the sweat beneath the irons, became inflamed. Each time they moved, they could feel the inflammation which began to ooze. After awhile Sarah was moved to Salem prison, while Mary was sent to Ipswich prison.<sup>35</sup> Hannah brought salt water from the ocean to bathe the injuries of both mother and aunt. She also sewed garments, by hand, that could burton up above the shoulders, so that they could be pulled down over the arms. Otherwise the older woman would not have been able to change clothes at all.

<sup>35</sup> McMillan, 465.

Hannah learned to massage her mother's back with powder and to dry her off with soft cloth after she had given her sponge baths. These were the only times that Mary felt any comfort in her body at all.

### Hannah Faces Facts

**H**annah heard about a man who would not confess; the torture of William Proctor whose neck and heels were bound so tightly that blood came gushing out of his nose. Justice Bradstreet ordered the imprisonment of more than thirty people; however, when he himself was accused by the girls, he made his escape.<sup>36</sup>

Hannah knew that her mother was going into something like a trance state, a distancing off from the present reality. She was preparing herself for death. Hannah felt terribly alone all of a sudden. She realized that she could not tell Mary of her new found, healing love for John Pyncheon nor of her pregnancy. She could not share the most important thing in her life with her mother before she died.

To distract herself, she tried to think of the most beautiful moments in her life. They all involved nature in its seasons, or John Pyncheon, or both together. She knew she would need this ability, that she shared with her mother, to dwell upon the comfort of nature's beauty, to save herself from depression. She thought of the black kittens that survived a parent death to go on living, to play together and grow. No doubt one of them at least would live to have more kittens.

The sound of the surf was in Mary's ears as she dreamed of summer days, when she was a young married woman. Isaac would take her to the shore, and they would sit on the rocks to watch the water fill the tide pools in the sunlight. In summer, the beach, a strip of land not far from the wharves of the busy Salem port, would be visited by Puritans who longed for a change of air. Their own cottages would be sultry in the heat that accumulated during the day. The cool nights of New England would bring balmy air, often rain and colder wind, to the wooden saltbox houses. Housewives would open all the windows to air out their rooms before shutting them against the night air.

Mary was unable to control the obsession with Judge Acorn that filled her brain these last two days. The vile man was leaving the position of Magistrate so as, he said, to withdraw from the hanging of the 'witches'. In reality, the other judges had forced him out. Acorn was never one to

<sup>36</sup> McMillan, 409.

finish his work, and this was no exception. The other judges abolished his position, claiming that the expense of paying for the court trials had put them in straits unrelieved by the fees usually collected from the hung members. They had grown tired of doing his work for him while he continued to collect a salary. Mary resented the lies that he spread, as usual, to cast himself in a better light than the actual facts revealed. She stretched her back muscles, tight from the position she was forced to maintain to keep from falling off the bench during the night. *At least he will not be leering at me from the judges' bench during my trial.* Mary knew in her bones that she was going to be tried soon. She had already decided that her purpose would be to write a document of protest against the collusion of the witnesses against the accused. The crazy girls were allowed to talk together, at all hours of the day and night. They figured out their stories and made congruent whatever accusations of time and place that might be questioned. She would ask Isaac to bring her paper and pen to write out a protest document.

Yesterday, Hannah had told Mary of Acorn's latest harassment against the Esty family. Isaac always reserved a quantity of the best feed for horses that the Acorn farm sold. But when he went to fetch it the week before, Acorn told him that he had given the Esty feed reserves to the Holton family. Isaac had to leave without it, and on the way home, after considering what he would feed his horses instead, he had trouble controlling his rage. The Holtons were the ones whose testimony against Rebecca had swung the judges against her. When the pigs had gotten into the Nurse farm gardens, and Rebecca had chased them out with her yells and her oak cudgel, the Holtons claimed that her anger proved she was in league with Satan. No proper Puritan woman would harbor anger like that. So when Acorn gave the Esty horse feed to the Holtons, he was deliberately reinforcing the enmity against the Towne women.

Isaac had come home and opened up the elderberry wine. He was drunk when Hannah arrived in the later afternoon. At first she was glad, thinking that it would be easier for her to get out of the house that night to meet her lover, who had arrived from Springfield. Her father would be in a deep sleep from the alcohol. But when she pieced together his exclamations against Acorn regarding the missing feed, she became wary. Didn't Isaac remember that their money situation was very grave? They wouldn't have been able to pay for the feed anyway. Hannah couldn't tell her father that John Pyncheon had brought feed from Springfield for their two horses. She wasn't worried about the feed; instead, she wondered about her father's memory. They had talked

about the food for the horses that very morning. She had insisted that he refrain from going to buy feed from the Acorns until their own finances were better.

Hannah did not tell her mother that her lover had provided the feed or that her father was losing his memory. Instead, she soothed Mary with a story about a kind neighbor dropping off the feed anonymously.

But Mary couldn't stop thinking about Acorn and how much she detested him. She decided that she must be under Satanic attack. The only way to break such an attack was through fasting and prayer.

She was grateful to the jailer for asking her to remove the slop basins the next morning. He removed her manacles and let her exercise her limbs. She appreciated anything to get out of the prison of the jail, but also the prison of her mind. She carefully set them down after emptying them, and dared to walk a few steps across the road. The jail nestled in a bird wood. The shadows of the trees in the wood moved very slightly in the mild breeze, and the birdcalls were soft in the upper limbs. She saw the dappled sunlight in the tree branches and admired the shades of green around her: lime buds, olive leaves, forest green needles and moss traces on the tree trunks. Green living growth surrounded her, and the pure woodland solitude filled her spirit. She saw a seagull, that had been blown inland by the recent storm, land on a birch branch where another seagull perched. *They may be mates, or at least friends. God has led the lost home again.*

Mary knew that the Satanic spell was broken, once more, by the healing power of nature and the presence of God in His Creation. She recalled the idea that people cannot be forced to do good; they must be drawn to it by goodness itself. She asked herself why the figure of Acorn had loomed so large in her mind; she realized that again she must separate herself from the goals of the world that he embodied: money, false reputation, and revenge.

That afternoon, when Isaac returned to the jail and she was able to comfort him, he took his hand in both of hers.

"Dearest," she began, looking into his face worn with sadness, "Acorn is driven by self interest. His deliberate flouting of the agreement you made to reserve the horse feed, is an example of one-upmanship. He has lost his position as one of the magistrates, and he must enlarge his own self image. He gave the feed to one of our family's enemies, the Holtons, just to show that he could do it. The only person who knew that he had done it, besides himself and Holton, was you. It served no other purpose than to be one up on you."

"It's no doubt best," said Isaac slowly, "that he is no longer on the bench. Heaven knows what influence he would continue to wield against our family from that spot."

"Yes, and I believe he was just waiting for a chance to malign me further, in a very public way." Mary smiled at him. "Will you bring me writing utensils the next time you come, Isaac? You must help me write a document to the court, to ask that the witnesses be forbidden to converse together and to get their stories in agreement. I know it is too late for me, but I mean to do what I can for the others."

Isaac held her in his arms. "Mary, you are a truly good woman. God has made you his own. I will bring what you ask in the next few days."

### Hannah and John Discuss the Future \*

While Hannah was dreaming of the next meeting with her lover, their child was growing within her. The time came when John could feel the bump in her stomach where the baby slept safely in his mother's womb. Hannah was surprised and overjoyed to see the delight in John's face when he discovered the soft rise in her flesh as she lay on her back in the wooded grove of beech and sugar maples. She sat up on her elbow and pushed a beechnut out of the way. She lifted the coverlet that John always brought with him. In his considerate way, he also brought two blankets, one to cover her up and one to use as a pillow.

"Are you sure you seek to marry soon, dearest?" she asked suddenly.

"Never so sure of anything, my love," he answered firmly. He did not tell her that his father had shown great displeasure when he was informed of John's lady in Topsfield. "We may have to steal away sooner than thought; Rhode Island looks better and better to me."

"Ah, so your parents disapprove! John, why didn't you tell me?" Hannah exclaimed.

"Hannah, they are very set in their ways. They care more about wealth and reputation than they do about love. I don't mind what they think. I've been saving to get us started, and the business that I contract here in Salem is also what sends me to other parts of the colony. I can continue these contracts in Rhode Island. The ship trade to the islands depends upon produce from the north; onions are the most popular items besides rum, and I've bought fields full of them. They'll grow in Rhode Island too, as will the corn and apples that ship well too. The wooden boards from the northern oak trees are also in demand there, for the

islands are almost bare of such trees. And your Dad's barrels are perfect for transporting big, bulky produce. We will be fine, my dearest love."

"I can see that you've been thinking about it," smiled Hannah. "You know I will go with you wherever we can live in peace. Yet I don't know what's going to happen to my mother," Hannah lowered her eyes. "I fear the worst, now that Aunt Rebecca is gone. We will have to wait until winter and see what happens, John. For now I will make more garments to hide the baby—at least the shawls we wear in the cold will help to conceal the child."

"You grow more beautiful daily, Hannah. I know the future together is worth our sacrifices now. Once you are my wife even your name..." he trailed off.

"Even my name will be hidden, and no one will know that I am related to the Towne Women of Salem," she finished ruefully. "But one day my mother will have public honor for her bravery and goodness," she said firmly.

"Yes, that madness will end, and we will not have to think about it anymore...except for the honor we will pay to the innocent victims of the insane accusations."

"When do you think we should make our move?"

"We will definitely leave, once your father is settled with the boys. Perhaps your sister Sarah will move in with him for awhile. Only then will we be free to leave. Definitely before the baby comes, dearest Hannah." So the plans were laid to move to Rhode Island.

At her trial on September 9, those testifying against her included Mary Walcott, Ann Putnam, Sarah Vibber, Mercy Lewis, and Elizabeth Hubbard. Two new witnesses came forth to speak of her 'suspicious' acts. The first was 70 year old Margaret Reddington, who'd been at the Esty home with her husband, whereupon she told Mary of some sickness she had suffered. That night, Mary came to her home bringing her fresh meat. At the trial, the Reddington woman testified that she told Mary 'twas not fit for the dogs and she vanished away." Puritans believed that witches were apt to inquire after sick people, especially if the tension between the neighbors was high. The second was a man known for his drunken fights and bad reputation, Samuel Smith of Boxford, who claimed that Mary had words with him and had said to him, "I would not have you be so rude as I might rue it hereafter." Then, as he was riding

<sup>37</sup> McMillan, 477.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

home that night he felt a blow on his shoulder and a stone wall nearby rattled so that his horse was frightened.<sup>37</sup>

At her trial, Mary was convicted and condemned. On September 22 she would hang with Martha Corey of Salem Village, Alice Parker and Ann Pudeator of Salem Town, Margaret Scott of Rowley, Wilnot Read of Marblehead, Mary Parker and Samuel Parker of Andover.<sup>38</sup>

In the Ipswich jail, Mary composed a statement that would go to the judges. It was after her trial on September 9<sup>th</sup>, but before her hanging on September 22<sup>nd</sup>, that she wrote the following document.

Not for my own life for I know I must die and my appointed time is sett but the Lord he knows it is that if it be possible no more innocent blood may be shed which undoubtedly cannot be Avoydd in the way and course you goe in I question not but your honors does to the utmost of your Powers in the discovery and detecting of witchcraft and witches and would not be guilty of innocent blood for the world but by my own Innocency I know you are in the wrong way the Lord in his infinite mercye direct you in this great work if it be his blessed will that no more Innocent blood be shed I would humbly begg of you that your honors would be pleased to examine the Afflicted Persons strictly and keepe them apart some time and Likewise to try some of these confesing wichis I being confident there is severall of them has belyed themselves and others as will appeare if not in this worl[d] I am sure in the world to com whither I am now agoing and I Question not bit until see an alteration of thes things they say my selfe and others having made a League with the Devil we connot confesse I know and the Lord knows as will shortly appeare they belye me and so I Question not but they doe others the Lord above who is the Searcher of all hearts knows that as I shall answer it att the Tribunal seat that I know not the least thinge of witchcraft therefore I cannot I dare not belye my own soule.<sup>39</sup>

At the close of this effort, Mary fell back, exhausted. A portion of her living spirit departed with the writing of this letter; she felt that her purpose was fulfilled. A fire went out of her eyes and her facial expressions became muted like her tongue. From that point on, her family had to ask her to repeat her words, for she spoke in such low tones that they could barely hear her.

<sup>39</sup> Edmund S. Morgan, *American Heresies: Profiles of Men and Women who Shaped Early America*. Norton: 2009, 127-8.



## Death of Mary Esty

Mary began having visions to prepare her soul and her mind for death. They started with her dream of a rose; she could smell its perfume distinctly amid the foul prison air. She dreamed that roses covered the wall of the prison, and that their winter twigs formed a net upon the stones. As she dreamed the net began to turn green; tiny buds turned into leaves and the leaves formed around rosebuds. She saw the roses unfold, petal by perfect petal, and felt their perfumed flesh against her skin. She could see into the heart of the largest rose as it grew bigger. Inside the rose heart she saw a jewel, and within the gem she could see the face of Mary, the mother of Christ. During the day she longed to sleep again so that she could see more of Mother Mary.

She knew she was going to die on September 22, as that date came to her in a dream. She began to look forward to her death as a release into heaven. One night she envisioned an inner courtyard, where the music of water falling over stones came from an interior fountain. Mary had never seen a fountain in her adult life. Yet she may have recalled one from an English city or from an imagined memory of the fountains Isaac had told her about in Greece and Rome.

The vision of an inner courtyard was lit dimly by lanterns placed upon the stones of a wall that ran the length of the room. She walked into the room from the lower right and saw the fountain in the middle of the room. As she approached it she could hear the music of the water falling and she could see what appeared to be stars upon the ceiling. She felt an all pervading sense of peace that made her drowsy. She sat down upon the stone wall and felt her eyes close.

Thereupon she began to relive the happiest moments of her life. As a small child, she had loved to run in the spring meadows with her older sister Rebecca, who appeared in the vision to be young and beautiful again. She felt the pressure of Rebecca's fingers tugging her closer, tossing her into the air and catching her in her arms. Both girls then tumbled down into the tender spring grass and rolled among the dandelions and daffodils. Mary went into a deep sleep and didn't waken until Dorcas pulled upon her arms and Tiruba passed a eucalyptus scented cloth under her nose.

"Mary, Mary you have frightened us!" Tiruba exclaimed. "We feared you wouldn't wake up at all!"

"I sometimes wish I would not awaken, dear friend. I was in the most beautiful dream...."

Tiruba looked closely at Mary's relaxed face and put her own head to one side.

"You dreaming of heaven, your future home," she said softly.

"Yes, I have these dreams often now," Mary said. "That's because my soul belongs to the God I will not betray with a lie, and a false confession of witchcraft," she smiled into Tiruba's face. "You had to lie to escape being beaten to death, but I have already lived my life and cannot injure my soul," she added.

Mary dreamed of the seasons and God's beautiful order on earth. She gave thanks for her earliest years in England and then her life in America; she praised him for her family. She recalled the birth of each baby and her happiness with Isaac to welcome each new life.

Mary pictured an oak tree in winter; she remembered the way it looked outside their home when the dead cat was found outside their door. She had asked Isaac to bury the cat at the foot of the oak tree. She knew that he would wait until rain came to soften the earth; meanwhile the frozen cat lay in their woodshed. After warm drops had fallen and melted the snow, she herself had placed the cat in its small grave and covered it with earth. She told Tiruba she'd said blessings over the animal beneath the tree. After a month, under the oak, spring breezes swayed while bells from lily of the valley over the tiny mound.

The oak itself was a majestic living testament to the strength and purpose of God. Its winter boughs were blackened by the sleet and hail; it groaned when the ice weighed it down and then, when the sun came out briefly, the ice suddenly fell off onto the snow below. The oak would snap its boughs back up to the sky. Mary could see this action from her kitchen window. She pictured it in her mind's eye. Afterwards, she would go outside and scout around to see if any squirrels had been hurled from their nests when the tree bough sprang up again. Once she found a dazed squirrel; she brought it some melted snow and nuts to eat.

The oak leaves looked like mittens; she'd often thought about the cross-over between nature and human life. Now nature healed her with its usual calm. She pictured her buried body disintegrating slowly into dust, and nurturing the oak tree's roots. She would have to ask Isaac to re-bury her on their property, away from the unhallowed ground of the 'witches' graves. But then she realized, maybe that would make him sad, to walk by her grave each day. She knew that she would be in heaven with her savior, so it really wouldn't matter where she was buried.

The scenes of her marriage began to play through her mind along with the seasons. The oak tree in spring was not as colorful as other trees

that sprouted lime green fuzz; instead it seemed to hold back from the restraint of age. She pictured the vivid blue sky between its waving branches in the spring wind. She saw the birds landing on its boughs and choosing a connection between the trunk and the heaviest limb, away from the north winds, facing the house, to build their nest. She saw the grave of Tiruba's cat and roused herself to tell Tiruba again about the grave. The black woman held her tightly and stroked her hair as she murmured the story about the cat. Tiruba did not know whether to think it was real, this talk about the burial of the cat, or whether Mary was imagining it. To Tiruba it really didn't matter how many times Mary told her the story or even whether or not it was real, since it gave comfort to both of them. Tiruba whispered to Mary how soft was the cat's fur when she petted it, how warm was the pet against her feet in the freezing cold bedroom given her by the frugal Parris family, how sweet was the cat to lick her face and hands, how its green eyes and black nose twinkled when she brushed it, how tiny were the sounds that it made when lapping up the milk she took from the kitchen to give it. Tiruba felt that Mary listened carefully to the story and finally fell asleep in her arms. Dorcas too listened to the story about the cat.

Small Dorcas had a bad experience with cats; they scratched her when she tried to pick them up. Dorcas had seen her mother throwing stones at them because her mother feared them and the mice they would drop at her feet. How could her mother be a witch, when she was afraid of cats and mice?

### Judge Acorn's Last Efforts Against Mary

One day the peace in Mary's heart was interrupted. Did Judge Acorn really stand before her, or was she dreaming still?

"Mistress Esty, pull yourself together!" she heard. She struggled to sit up. Soon Dorcas was at her side, and Tiruba stood behind the bench holding onto her shoulders.

"What are you doing here?" she murmured. Mary did not know that the resignation had been only partial; Acorn had agreed to serve the Oyer and Terminer group as an informative. In effect, he was a spy.

"Yes, who gave you leave to enter the women's prison?" asked Tiruba.

"Dare not to talk to your master in that tone!" bellowed Acorn.

"What do you want?" whispered Mary.

"I want you to tell me what you've learned about the other witches besides yourself," Acorn said, in a more conciliatory manner.

"There are no witches here," answered Mary. Tiruba left her side and went into the kitchen. She returned with a broom which she placed before the entrance to the women's room.

"You are a convicted witch and you know the rest of them," insisted Acorn. He fixed his small eyes on her face and noted with satisfaction the new wrinkles there. She was no longer the beauty he had pursued.

"I do not wish to talk further," continued Mary.

"Do you have nothing at all to say?" he persisted. At that moment a loud crash came from the entrance of the jail.

"The devil is coming!" shouted Dorcas apprehensively. Judge Acorn turned suddenly ran out of the room and tripped on the broom that Tiruba had left in the doorway. He fell on his shoulder and screamed. He slowly picked himself up, rubbing his shoulder. No one moved to help him.

"You'll pay for this! You'll pay for this!" he yelled as he limped out of the jail.

*When you've paid the ultimate price to maintain your connection to the Holy Spirit, a threat from a silly man like that is worthless.* Mary held up her hand and motioned to Tiruba, who had come into the stone room after he loped out.

"You are so clever," she said softly. "I don't think he'll be back."

That night, Mary was rescued from the memory of toxic Acorn by a new vision of nature in fall. The clearing was bordered by late blooming roses twined around the fence. Mist carried the golden shower of sunlight up into the cooling air as the sun set. Last rays of light fell upon the ruby leaves, the russet maples and yellow green birches. The deep sky turned purple and violet blue and the peace it brought Mary was heaven itself.

### Mary's Hanging

September 22 dawned cold and bright, more like an early winter than an autumn day. The frost crept into the jail and numbed the women's toes. Tiruba came to Mary and rubbed her feet to arouse her when the hangman arrived to get the 'witches.' Tiruba's face was dripping tears; she kept wiping them angrily as she prepared her friend's dress for her death. Hannah had come early, just after morning light. She brought a thick

woolen shawl to warm her mother on her last journey. The family was alert to the fact that Mary was already living in another world; she had not carried on a normal conversation for several days. That is why, when the carts arrived at Gallow's Hill, they were surprised when Mary roused herself to climb down and embrace them. She seemed calm, even happy, as she spoke quietly to each family member. She told them all that she would await them in heaven, and that she herself would be safe in the arms of her Savior. Only her face clouded with grief as she hugged Hannah last.

"Goodbye, child, remember to be brave. Life will bring thee bitter moments; would that I could be there to share them. Remember to pray often and you will see me in your dreams... God will help you, Hannah. Remember that your name means the Grace of God; He will strengthen you. Indeed, you can do all things through Christ Jesus. You have been a wonderful daughter to me and I am proud of you. May the sweetness of your dear heart be protected by the love of God.

Please look after your father and brothers for me. Tell them each day how much I love them.

And to you, dear Isaac, you have been the best husband. I am so grateful for your love. I will wait for you in heaven where we will embrace again. " She kissed his weathered cheek, then turned away.

Mary climbed back into the cart that would take her to her death. When the hangman positioned the noose around her neck, just before he slapped the oxen to pull the cart out from beneath her, her eyes closed. In her mind's eye she saw a dove fly out of the heavens, as the Holy Spirit left the clouds to embrace this sacred servant. And Mary's earthly life ended as she entered eternity.

### Postscript

Mary Towne Esty died with the last of the 'witches'; no more were hanged. The Court of Oyer and Terminer made public apology for the executions and acknowledged it had condemned innocent people. Some financial remuneration was made to the families of the innocent dead. Salem Village was renamed Danvers in an attempt to start anew.

While some of the characters are purely fictional—such as Mary's friend Constance, Hannah's lover John Pyncheon, and Judge Acorn—the remainder of the characters are historical. The scenes are an imagined account of the days leading up to Mary Esty's trial and execution. However, they are based upon historical facts taken from the following sources.

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